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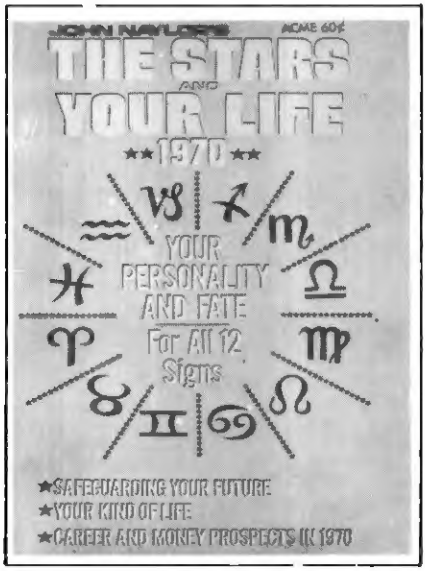

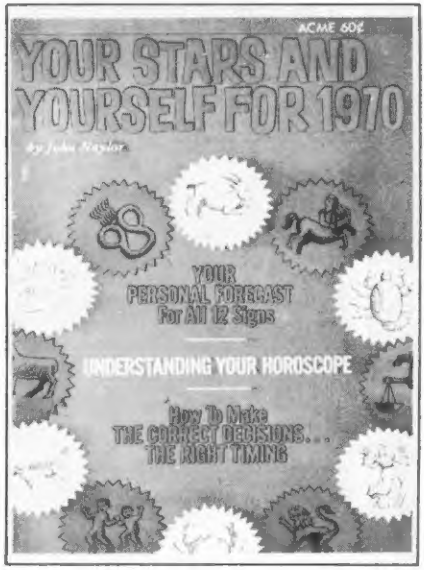

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The Stockade

From the time that they first made permanent settlements on American soil, and it had been learned that the great new continent spanned two oceans, the British thought big. As Woodrow Wilson put it in an article, *Early Migrations Westward,* which appeared in the September 1902 issue of *HARPERS MAGAZINE:* "In the old days the lands about the Ohio had been deemed part of Virginia's domain. Almost every state of the seaboard had had at first a grant from the Crown which read as if it had been meant to set up at the west no boundaries at all except the boundaries of the continent itself. Virginia claimed practically all the western country which lay north of her own southern line extended, under the terms of her charter of 1609, which antedated all the rest, and which defined her territory as running from her boundaries at the sea-coast 'up into the land throughout from sea to sea, west and northwest.' "

The map accompanying this article (Map of the United States in 1783) shows that while there is a shared strip of territory with Connecticut, that starts at the Mississippi at the west and cuts through the tip of Lake Huron, as well as the southern part of Lake Ontario; and above that another shared with Massachusetts, Virginia, west of Pennsylvania runs right up to Canada. The other colonies' territories, at first at least, ran straight to the Pacific. As it happened, there was an annoying matter about claims by Spain and France; but by 1783 the country was Spanish possession west of the Mississippi. (This would not last long; it became French when Napoleon over-ran Spain—and then the emperor made one of the most fantastic bargain land offers in history when American commissioners went to him to propose purchase of a bit of the Louisiana territory.)

But in 1783, it was a very unstable situation, and things had been bad enough in the days before independence, what with various colonies conflicting in their claims of western lands. The territory shown as belonging to Virginia (or shared with Virginia in that 1783 map) was soon ceded to the Confederation, loosely described as the new United States of America; and it was agreed finally that the West, which was already common property *de facto,* should become so *de jure.* (Which is a fancy lawyer's way of saying that we recognize the situation as legal, and will uphold its rights to be that way.)

We almost obtained a state named after a famous American out of this situation. Wilson continues: "Already the western settlers were showing themselves, by not a little heady wilfulness, to be of the same stock that had made the original colonies first strong and then independent. In its April session, 1784, the legislature of North Carolina had followed the example of New York and Virginia by ceding to the general government her lands beyond the mountains. It committed the blunder,

however, of making the grant contingent upon its acceptance by Congress, which might have been taken for granted, and making no specific provision in the mean time for the government of the very flourishing and very mettlesome little group of pioneer settlements which John Sevier and James Robertson had helped to plant upon the upland streams which ran beyond the mountains into the Tennessee. These promptly concluded that, if they were not governed by North Carolina and had not yet been taken under the care and government of the Confederation of former colonies, they were their own masters, and proceeded to erect for themselves an independent state, which they called 'Franklin', after the genial wit and philosopher at Philadelphia. When North Carolina thereupon rescinded her act of cession, in order to win them back to her dominion, they refused to be reannexed. It was a sign of the times, a taste of that western quality which the nation's affairs were often to smack of.

"The whole country caught the flavor of that quality when Mr. Jay proposed to relinquish the navigation of the Mississippi for a generation to Spain, in return for certain commercial advantages greatly desired at the Atlantic seaports. Spain had already shown an ugly temper with regard to the use of the river whose outlet she controlled. She had seized merchandise passing down towards its mouth. She had instigated Indian raids against the new-made settlements on the Cumberland, which crowded too near its course. Mr. Jay had been one of the commissioners through whom the United States got their western boundary at the Mississippi, and their grant of the right to use the stream, at the making of the treaties of peace; and he knew how difficult a thing it had been to force Spain back to that boundary. But he had not seen that rising tide of emigration now pouring into the West; had not imagined the

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empire making there, the homes already established, the toil and success already achieved. He thought that there would probably be no occasion to use the Mississippi for twenty-five or thirty years yet to come. He proposed, therefore, in 1785, when Congress had made him its Secretary of Foreign Affairs and had bidden him to negotiate a treaty of commerce with Don Diego Gardoqui, the newly arrived representative of Spain, to surrender the navigation of the lower Mississippi, which he thought was not needed, for a term of twenty-five years in exchange for commercial advantages which would redound to the profit of the merchants of the shipping colonies, together with certain concessions with regard to land claims in the West which were likely to please the people of the South. The instant cry of hot protest that came out of the West apprised eastern politicians of a new world a-making there, the new frontiers of the nation. The proposed treaty was not adopted.

"It was hard for men in the East to realize how fast settlers were multiplying and their settlements growing to the proportion of states beyond the mountains, where only the other day there had been nothing but unbroken wilderness—faster a great deal than the original colonies had grown. So early as 1784 the settlers in the Kentucky country deemed themselves numerous and independent enough to be detached from Virginia and set up as one of the states of the Confederation. When rumors reached them of what Jay proposed, some of the bolder spirits among them negotiated a private treaty of commerce with the Spanish in their own behoof at New Orleans. When Virginia interposed delays and difficulties in the way of their plan to become a state, they listened very tolerantly to certain lawless men who proposed that they make some

(Turn to Page 124)

The Hickory Heart

by WILLIAM CORCORAN

Jim Bentley didn't have a chance up against the Jorgans, and everyone knew it but Jim, it seemed. Then this stranger on the dodge came in to town, and Tamburlaine Tolliver saw a way in which the Jorgans could be tricked.

TAMBURLAINE TOLLIVER, like a sardonic and slightly grim old owl, was settled in his favorite perch, the tall chair behind the post office desk, when the fugitive came sloping quietly into the spacious cow-country general store.

Sloping is the word: neither furtive nor fierce, yet somehow gentle and dangerous as a jungle cat. Hair-trigger nerve — and trouble.

Old Tamburlaine watched him narrowly with the acute insight of long desert years. Any trouble walking in Tamburlaine settlement was bound to be his special concern at any time. It was most particularly so today. Trouble was already abroad today, bad trouble; and like ill news, it had a way of coming in bunches.

The stranger, after one gimlet-eyed glance about the store, slid into a seat at the restaurant counter. It was mid-afternoon, hot

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and quiet, but he looked like a man who had been empty since sun-up.

He was young, gaunted, sun-dark from much recent travel: hard going over the lonely desert country to westward, by the alkali dust. His clothes and gear, from the competent spurs to the holstered .45 that seemed a born part of him, were of good quality and faded and worn only where skilled, hard riding would wear them.

The fine roan horse left at the hitch rail outside looked like a prized, grain-fed animal; but it was, significantly, about completely tuckered. No man let such a horse stand while he saw to his own wants first — unless for grave reason.

Add up a number of similar small details to the fact that a bitter reckless personal devil smouldered not too secretly in the man's dark eyes, and you came to a wary and warranted conclusion in that day and country.

The young man was a lone rider, a fugitive, probably hard pressed, undoubtedly prepared to guard his own counsel and be polite and icy cool about it, but explosive as dynamite to monkey with. A man not necessarily to be feared, but — for a lone desert outpost like Tamburlaine, Arizona Territory—to be handled with cautious care and hastened on his somber journey with sincere Godspeed. A man to leave alone.

Tamburlaine Tolliver, postmaster, founder, arbiter, and on needful occasion even tyrant to the community that bore his name, came to these dour conclusions, and speculated on certain of their more ominous possibilities. Then he abruptly tucked them all away for the time being in a mental pigeonhole. Dread, unaccustomed and sincere, assailed him.

A young woman, pretty and eye-arresting in her dashing tan riding outfit, had appeared in a rear door leading from the Tolliver living quarters. She was Julie Deering, daughter of the nearby Lazy D, and her lovely brown eyes wore a haunted look as she bore down on the post office corner.

Tamburlaine knew too well the cause of that look. It was the selfsame trouble that for the past twenty-four hours had weighed down his own tough old heart; trouble for which he hadn't

glimpsed, until just this very moment, even a glimmer of a way out.

"Howdy, Julie," he said with evasive gruffness. "Been visitin' my missus?"

"Yes, I came in the back way," she told him. The unhappy eyes were searching, insistently questioning. "But it's you I came to see, of course, Tam. I just couldn't stay out at the ranch. Did you get to talk to Jim?"

"I did. Just as you asked me to. Rode out to his claim last evening."

"And what did he say? Did you make him see? Is he — Tam, will he stay out of town tonight?"

He looked at her. Evasion was useless. "He will not, Julie. He's ridin' in at sundown, as planned."

She closed her eyes at the blow that was. "Oh, Tam!" she whispered, her voice hushed by terror. "Tam, they'll kill him. Those terrible Jorgans. I've prayed and prayed! He won't heed me. What did he tell you?"

"I talked to Jim Bently," Tamburlaine said with difficulty, "as I likely wouldn't dare talk to a son. I told him my opinion of his chances and his good sense, feudin' with as tough a pair as the Jorgan brothers. I agreed they might be rustlers, thieves and highbinders, but reminded him they were likewise close to professional gunfighters. He's still bent on seein' it through."

"And fighting them?"

"If it's fightin' they must have."

It was too much. Her last defenses crumbled. They had resisted for days, and their strength was gone. She was crying, silently, despairingly.

"Julie, honey," he pleaded, suffering, "remember the fighting stock you yourself come from. There'll always be times, little as we like it, when a man's got to fight for his own."

"I don't care! Jim can't lick the Jorgans. You know it."

"What would you have him do?"

"Anything, Tam. Oh, what if they have been stealing from him? What if they did pick a fight over it? I'd even have him

leave the country right this minute, safe and alive. No matter what he gave up."

"He'd be giving you up, for one thing."

"Me? Why? I'm no Indian giver. He has my promise. He'd need only lift a finger, and I'd go with him."

"I know that," he sighed. "But Jim Bentley's not that kind of man, Julie. He'd never run away, and you with him. What he has, he's earned, and that includes you; and what he holds, he'll fight for."

"And the Jorgans two to his one!" she said starkly. "Do you know they're next door at the Stingaree bar this minute, waiting? Jim knows they'll be here. Oh, Tam," she begged, "do something, anything. You've got to stop him!"

"Stop him?" Tamburlaine slid from the chair. His face was set and hard as he stood there, breaking a matchstick into small pieces. "Girl, I won't so much as try. He'd never forget it or forgive me."

"Tam, do you think *I'll* ever be able to forgive—?"

"Hold on!" he said sharply. "Let me say this out. I won't stop him. It wouldn't stop the stealing or this feud. Besides, he was born with a tough fighting heart, your Jim, the real hickory, and his kind is not to be stopped. However — there may be other ways. I'll make no promises, but I'll see what can be done."

"You mean —oh, Tam, you really mean you know a way?"

"I'll do what can be done." He was stern, and the old eyes were gray and frosty. "No questions, mind. And no talk, now or later."

She looked at him, and suddenly saw all she wanted to see. She was pale and shaken, but all at once desperately anxious only to please.

"I'll leave it to you entirely, Tam. I'll stay along in the back. I can't ride home now. I'll be quiet and pray — for all of us."

"Not excepting even the Jorgans," he murmured grimly as she abruptly flew to the rear. The fighting heart, the real hickory! It was bred in her breed too.

And now, he thought, it would be extremely, if desperately,

interesting and profitable to find out whether it was bred in the Jorgans as well.

No one in Tamburlaine Tolliver's combined general store, restaurant, post office and unofficial city hall had taken more than passing notice of that low-voiced conversation with Julie Deering.

There were only a few about at this hour in any case. The quiet suited Tamburlaine right down to the ground. He drummed the desk top a moment, thinking hard, and then strolled out to the restaurant counter.

He requested coffee of the hired girl, and as he poured sluggish condensed milk into a spoon, turned a completely bland and innocent regard on the fugitive eating hungrily alongside him.

"Stranger hereabouts, I reckon," he told the man. "Travelin' through?"

The man gave him a long, opaque look and a grunt that might have meant anything.

Tamburlaine went on, "Come in over the Big Sandy, I judge by the alkali. That's pretty mean country this time of year."

"Is it?" said the other.

"Reason I was interested to take note," Tamburlaine rambled on, "is because I own a couple of bunches of stock that range out that way between the Sandy and the Paso del Muerte. Ain't enough to pay keepin' a real close eye on 'em. Folks passin' through often leave a word or two about 'em. Brand is a Leanin' Ladder, left side. You might have run across it."

Temper worked in the man, held in rigid check. He was being examined, and didn't like it. But it was hard to see anything sinister in Tamburlaine's curiosity, in the man himself.

"I might have run across the brand," he said, "but I wouldn't know. I wasn't watchin' strange brands."

"I reckon I can understand that," Tamburlaine allowed. What he understood particularly was that a man traveling chiefly by night, with an eye peeled for pursuit by day, was most unlikely to see any brands at all. "Man has his hands full just gettin' himself and his horse safe over the sands. Fine lookin' animal you got out there."

The man shot a glance through the front window and then stared hard at Tamburlaine. "Look here, pardner," he said with tight-lipped intensity of feeling. "Just exactly what's weighin' so heavy on your mind?"

"Hell, nothing extra." Tamburlaine sampled the coffee. "Unless maybe the fact that it's a kind of shame to see a fine horse standing without attention when that's actually plumb unnecessary. I got a stable out back with plenty of grain and water and a boy that knows how to rub down a tired horse. Fifteen years now I been purveyin' food and shelter to man and beast in this quiet corner of the world, and without complaint.

"I judge to be good for fifteen more – strictly on the same give-and-take terms. And that, I reckon, is about as plain as you'd care to have me put it, now ain't it?"

That, under the circumstances, was putting it powerful plain. Something like amazement won out over anger in the other man. He decided on an equal degree of frankness – no more, no less – although without any least softening of that hard, dangerous defiance of spirit.

"That's probably as plain as is comfortable, friend. I'll take it at face value, and thank you to take me the same. I'm plumb in a hurry, but I got to rest that horse. Long as I got no complaints to make hereabouts, you can count on havin' none again' me."

"Good!" said Tamburlaine with satisfaction. "I'll see about your horse myself. He'll be safe in back; take your time. There'll be a moon again tonight, should you plan to travel along. The country's fairly easy, eastward of here."

"So I been told," drawled the man. He smiled a slightly crooked, cynical smile, friendly enough, amused, but with a shiver in it notwithstanding.

Tamburlaine hummed an absentminded tune as he went out front. Hot afternoon quiet prevailed, except for the Stingaree Saloon next door, from which came sounds of laughter and glassware and loud talk.

Tamburlaine eyed the place and stopped humming and swore to himself; he loosed the stranger's roan and led him forthwith

around the side of the store toward the stable. The brute seemed to give a big sigh, as if he understood and was grateful, and came willingly.

. . . The Jorgan brothers had been sharper than a thorn in the hide of Tamburlaine Tolliver these two years or more. In more than his hide, to be sure; his distaste had been far more general than personal.

The two had first come drifting into the country not unlike the fugitive in the store this afternoon; but unlike him had stayed on, taking squatters' possession of an abandoned ranch establishment up near Paso del Muerte.

They ran some indifferent cattle, attended most of the roundups in half the state, and talked knowingly of markets and conditions and prospects. But their scant beef shipments had never remotely supported the poker-playing, heavy-drinking, high-flying kind of existence they were somehow able to enjoy, both locally and on their frequent trips outside.

What actually did support it was a matter for conjecture — uncomfortable conjecture on the part of certain struggling settlers like Jim Bentley. Jim's cash profits didn't come anywhere near matching what should be his natural increase. The result: months of sober delay in a marriage long settled, and by all that country, warmly approved.

Jim, as the phrase had it, was being stolen blind. By whom? Well, Jim had determined to find out.

Now in that country as well as anywhere else a man can find out a great deal to his own satisfaction without establishing legal proof for a courtroom. Besides, in that primitive country and time legal actions were often long and largely futile.

And short of catching the Jorgan brothers redhanded (which would have meant, of course, a knockdown gun battle), Jim had established plenty in his own mind to convince him that the pair were thieves. In his understandable anger, blind and wild as can be imagined, he said as much, openly and without reserve.

He knew what he was doing, of course. The community believed him, having established a few things of its own; but he

had invoked a primitive court where judge and jury were pointedly not asked to serve.

The accused, if they thought they could get away with it, were entitled to demand the verdict of a trial by combat; and the Jorgans, being two to Jim's one, thought they could get away with it. They had good reason, for by ominous and explicit report they had done so before.

And so the brothers had taken more or less formal cognizance of the situation by confronting Jim Bentley, challenging him to put up or shut up. He had refused to shut up or swallow a word. That had occurred on Bentley's own land, so the Jorgans withdrew without taking action then. There were witnesses, and they hadn't blunt murder in mind.

That wouldn't be wise.

But they had definite measures in mind, because they could not live on in that country and leave the charges unanswered. And they had no taste for recourse to law themselves.

The grim and inevitable climax had at last come today, with Jim Bentley due in Tamburlaine settlement at sundown according to unvarying weekly habit, and the Jorgans there before him, contrary to their late custom for that precise day, and the world tacitly informed that these three could no longer occupy the same acre together – alive.

It was a desperate, tragic situation; yet one not without precedent in Tamburlaine Tolliver's experience. A man who had lived and moderately prospered in Arizona Territory without ever requiring the aid of established law, he could personally accept the issue.

But Julie Deering's agony was another thing. Her logic he could not answer and her pleading he could not ignore.

And so as he watched the stable boy rub down the fugitive's handsome roan and measure out water and oats and barley, he mulled over all these things and debated inwardly, and swore again and hoped he was not stepping in where angels – nay, the devil himself! – would unquestionably fear to tread.

When Tamburlaine returned to the store, the fugitive had finished and gone out. Tamburlaine walked on to the front porch.

Beyond the shade of the porch roof the sun was still molten, but the shadows in the soft dust were lengthening. The day was getting on.

Tamburlaine stepped over to the Stingaree and went in. It was cool and dark and hard to see for a moment in the saloon. He stopped at the angle of the bar and asked for a cigar. He took his time lighting it.

The Jorgan brothers were standing together, big and formidable, at the far end of the bar; they gave Tamburlaine no more than a glance. They did not exactly ignore him, but it was their way to pretend to, and that suited him any day.

There weren't many others present. A pair of young cowboys stood halfway along the bar, voluble with beer. At a table against the side wall four players thumbed the cards in a droning game of stud. And watching them with remote, expressionless eyes, in a chair tilted back to the wall, was the fugitive.

Tamburlaine grunted and walked across the room. He nodded to the fugitive. The man stared stonily.

Tamburlaine said, "The roan's comfortable. Everything hunky dory?"

"Suits me – so far." That suspicious temper again dimly flared up, was checked.

"Glad to hear it. You want the animal saddled and readied any special time?"

"Yes. The minute I ask for it. And I ain't even telling myself when that'll be. Is that clear?"

"That's all I wanted to know," murmured Tamburlaine.

The conversation was private, quiet-spoken; but something about it caught the players' attention. Their greetings were casual, not intruding.

"Room for another hand, Tam. Busy? Set right in."

"Got the time, as the feller said, but ain't got the inclination. I'll save my money."

"How about your friend?" The speaker glanced at the fugitive, courteous, impersonal. "You're welcome, stranger."

The fugitive weighed the idea, but wasted no time. He kicked up his chair. "Thanks. Don't mind if I do."

Tamburlaine said nothing more, but to himself he smiled a wry, dry, invisible smile. He walked back to the bar. "Denis, I think I'll vary the monotony and have a drink."

He glanced along the bar to the two Jorgans. "Gentlemen, I'd admire to have your company. Will you join me?"

The Jorgans were quite nonplussed. They looked a queer sight standing there, surly and undecided, well over six feet both of them, with heavy hands and faces and pale, suspicious eyes; with long, embossed gun holsters swung low and a little forward so that they were conspicuous in a most sinister way.

First of all, they had been drinking beer – strictly – for good and obvious reasons. Secondly, while any friend might decline that idle invitation with thanks and not another thought, any man not quite a friend advisedly watched his step.

"That's mighty kind," began Brock Jorgan, the elder with the scar on the bridge of his nose, talking in a kind of ornate, cautious growl, "But Mal and me, we–"

"Don't mention it," Tamburlaine said imperturbably, moving down near them. "My pleasure. Wanted a word with you anyway. Set 'em up, Denis."

Nobody said another word for a moment while the bartender set out the glasses. The brothers looked at each other, nodded, and poured drinks without further demur. But they were uneasy.

Tamburlaine proposed no health. He said very quietly, gazing into his glass, "I'm much too well known hereabouts for any need of informin' you it ain't my way to horn in on another man's shindy. If I seem to do so, maybe you'll allow it's because I'm like to have good cause."

They stared, their eyes beginning to narrow. They said nothing.

"In the matter of a certain encounter that's in the cards for sundown today–"

Mal Jorgan growled an oath in his throat and grabbed the bar rail as if to choke it; and as swiftly, Brock clutched his arm and said very steadily, "Shut up! Go on, Tolliver. You got any good cause, I aim to know it."

"In this certain matter," Tamburlaine went on, "I must first of all ask, as a responsible citizen, is there any way tolerable left of

calling it off? Is there anything practical a third party can do or can promise will be done?"

Brock Jorgan gave a sharp exhalation. "Did Jim Bentley send you?"

"You know damn well he didn't! I've been a friend, but I reckon he'd shoot me out of hand for saying this much. I'm talking for myself, and I've asked a fair question."

Distrust darkened the big man's face. "I could tell you what to do with your fair question. Never mind. The answer is no!"

"Good! Then there's something I calculate you ought to know. I hate and abominate violence and bloodshed. If I can stave it off with a pointed word where and when it'll do the most good, I'll do it."

"Go on." Rigid was the other's expression, rigid and cruel.

"You two have got this all figured out," said Tamburlaine. "You are two men again' one, two fast guns again' one mighty inexperienced at killing. You picked the time and place among neighbors bonded and sealed not to interfere. There can be only one ending."

"If it's his finish, it's his own fixin'!"

"That brings up my point exactly," said Tamburlaine, looking at Brock Jorgan and smiling with chill eyes. "What Jim Bentley is fixin' is absolutely not his finish. This is now frankly and with no further reservation a word of warning. Whatever Jim Bentley is fixin', with the odds unfairly again' him, is going to be right and good with me and with all this whole community. And what he's fixin' is not his finish, understand?"

A pause. "What do you mean?"

"You got your wits about you. Just what would you do if you were bucking the wrong odds?"

"Do? Me?" Brock bristled, glared. "You mean he's bringin' along a war party?"

Tamburlaine chuckled. "I do not. He'll come ridin' alone. That's on my oath."

"Then what are you drivin' at?" snarled Jorgan.

Unhurriedly Tamburlaine finished his drink. "God gave a measure of good sense to the least of his creatures, gentlemen. I

asked you to figure what you'd do facin' unequal odds. I reckon I said enough. Now good day and — so help me, good luck!"

He slid some money on the bar and walked away with a swirl of cigar smoke trailing, leaving them standing there like a pair of angry and badly confounded statues.

Tamburlaine Tolliver did nothing whatever of importance in the next hour. He went back briefly to his private quarters and found motherly, cheerful Mrs. Tolliver tactfully entertaining Julie Deering on the little rear veranda.

Tamburlaine had to contend with several urgent questions. No, nothing at all had happened yet. No, he couldn't say exactly what he was expecting to happen.

He smiled a little, almost a teasing smile but for the evasive, grim compassion of it. "Julie, honey, I told you I could promise nothing. I said I'd do my best."

"I know you did, Tam," she said in a low voice, contrite.

"Well, that's what I'm still doing." He shook his head, troubled. "Maybe I'm expectin' too much of human nature. But I've studied it enough in my time to count on it mostly reactin' by rote, each kind to its own bent.

"There's your Jim, with the old hickory in him — I know enough not to try to stop him. Then there's others. There's some with no hickory in 'em at all, but plain matchwood."

Then he shrugged: "Be patient and keep on prayin', girl. If there's news,I figure you'll know it like a gunshot."

When Tamburlaine went restively back to the store, he found a customer awaiting him. It was Brock Jorgan.

"I'll take a sack of makin's," he said. His voice sounded queer, as if under a strain. His eyes were queer, behind their adamant sheen.

Tamburlaine gave him a sack of fine-cut.

Jorgan curled a leaf of rice paper.

"Who's your friend?"

Tamburlaine looked surprised.

"Friend?"

"Feller playin' stud next door."

"You mean that stranger? Never saw him before in my life."

"No?" Jorgan licked the cigarette, smoothed it.

Tamburlaine leaned over the counter. "Jorgan, that man ate a meal here. He ain't talkative, as you may have noticed. Even if he was, I'd tell you no more about him than the color of his money – which is exactly the same as yours."

Jorgan sneered, cigarette drooping from ugly mouth. Indecision was in his eyes. "If he's a friend of yours, Tolliver, maybe you owe him a favor. Get him out – away – anywhere!"

"Why should I?"

"Why? Circumstances, they say, alter cases. Well, some cases can alter circumstances. I'm one of them, Tolliver – a threestar, triple-ply hardcase from 'way back!"

"Meaning?" Tamburlaine inquired.

"Meanin' that you done a power of talkin', Tolliver," Jorgan snarled. "Circumstances around here don't set right to suit me at all. If they get altered – sudden – you got no call to act surprised. Savvy?"

"Man, I don't know what you're talkin' about in the least," said Tamburlaine.

Rage worked in Jorgan. "All right. You stick to your riddle and I'll hang on to mine. We'll swap answers later. Expect me, Tolliver!"

The big man stalked from the store. And Tamburlaine Tolliver smiled. It was a cold, not very pleasant smile.

Not very long after that incident the doors of the Stingaree opened again and a man came out. Tamburlaine, from his perch in the post office corner, where he could keep watch on the entire brief street, saw the man appear, then pause, pondering darkly, and next expectorate into the dust with skill, feeling and vehemence. Following which he headed for the store.

It was the fugitive, edgy and restless. He offered no speech until he had taken a good look around the crowded shelves of the store. Finally he requested Tamburlaine to reel him off a length of picket rope. He wanted also a couple of cans of tomatoes, some bacon, salt, beans, tobacco, matches. He paid for the things with a couple of shiny new silver dollars.

"Looks like some of Moze Miller's fresh bank money," Tamburlaine remarked. "Have any luck?"

"Some," allowed the other. "Could have been better."

"How so?"

"Two fellers elbowed into the game and spoiled my taste for it. Your friends are all right, but I hate a hawg."

"The Jorgan brothers, I expect. The big pair with the flashy guns."

"That's right," the fugitive said dryly. "You bought 'em a drink, but by the effects I didn't judge 'em as friends."

"They ain't, strictly speakin'. Still, they reckon themselves to be right sporty company.

"They reckon too much. They reckoned and rooted with both snoots and all feet. Look, pardner. Askin' personal questions don't happen to be a fixed habit you got to put up with around here, does it?"

"By no means."

"Just a private peculiarity, eh?"

"Strictly private," assured Tamburlaine. He watched the man.

The fugitive grunted, somberly thoughtful. He did not develop the subject. "You might kindly hold on to them things till I'm leavin'. What's that pokey little joint up the street aimin' to be correctly, a pool parlor or a barber shop?"

"Both," smiled Tamburlaine. "The signs might confuse you but they mean well. You can get a tooth yanked too."

The man smiled slightly, grimly. "A shave will do me fine, if that barber's real lighthanded. I'm inclined to be right techy in a chair." He looked around. "You keep that coffee steamin'? It's a prime cup of Java. I'll try another first."

He strolled to the rear.

. . . Time became to Tamburlaine like a wire stretched taut and singing a rising note. He chewed an unlit cigar and fixed himself firmly in the post office corner. His thoughts right then were not the best of company.

Suddenly the cigar stopped jerking in his mouth. It remained rigid. So too did Tamburlaine, staring out at the porch of the Stingaree Saloon.

The Jorgans were out there together. They were talking, arguing, snarling at each other – yet in subdued tones, so that not a word of their dispute carried. Still, watching, it was evident that it wasn't a dispute exactly; it was a debate. They were men of a common purpose; the choice of means alone divided them.

Tamburlaine, with a sense of chill, felt no need whatever of overhearing that debate.

Presently, with the steadiness of a clock ticking off moments of eternity, came the light heel-taps of the fugitive coming from the rear: calm, quiet, very sure. He passed the post office corner with a casual glance and went on through the door. He turned up the street toward the combined Tonsorial & Billiard Parlors beyond the Stingaree.

Mal Jorgan spied him first and hissed warning to Brock, but just too late. The fugitive caught the warning, the sudden cessation of Brock's harangue, the ominous silence clapped on them both. He was staring steadily, inscrutably at the pair as he passed by.

The Jorgans wordlessly watched his long-limbed stride as the fugitive went on up the street. They were still watching when he turned aside. In the doorway of the shack with the ambitious sign the fugitive darted his gaze suddenly sidewise and for an instant the three men locked eyes again. Then the door banged shut.

The Jorgans stood there without saying anything. Brock rolled a cigarette with a little shower of grains. Mal opened a jack-knife and went after a splinter in his palm. All debate was over. Mysteriously they were two men standing there waiting stonily because they were in full accord and there was nothing more to say.

Tamburlaine Tolliver felt perspiration beading on his face although the heat of the day had markedly lessened. The shadows in the street were very long now, and the low, bare hills to the south had turned violet and mauve and indigo. The sun was going fast.

The two on the Stingaree porch did not wait very long. Mal Jordan snapped the jack-knife shut and put it away. Brock took a

last drag, dropped the cigarette and stepped on it. They glanced at each other. Brock said something. They set out together up the street toward the little barber shop.

Tamburlaine let go an explosive breath and backed from his corner. He grabbed up the small collection of supplies selected by the fugitive and took them with him through the side door. He ran across the stable yard, calling for the hostler.

The youngster popped into view from the rear of the stable, spurred by the note of emergency in that call.

Tamburlaine snapped, "Get out that roan. The new horse. Saddle him!"

"You bet!"

Tamburlaine continued, sharply: "Where are the saddle bags? Fill the water bag. Put a good ration of oats in a sack and tie it on."

While the youngster jumped to obey, Tamburlaine tore at the saddle bags. They contained precious little. He packed the things expertly, losing not a minute.

He had just stepped back to inspect the completed job, the saddled horse standing cool and fresh and snorting softly with awareness of human excitement, when without warning or preliminary, the shooting started.

It was a sound that stopped the breath in a man's throat, listening to it, shrinking from the imagined impact of those bullets. It was muffled, coming from somewhere inside four walls.

Alone in the town of all who stopped dead in their tracks to listen, Tamburlaine knew the source of that sound. He got started in the same instant, running over the yard and out to the street and then up past the Stingaree.

The shooting was all over before he reached the barber shop door. The stillness was unnerving; not a voice whispered inside. Tamburlaine could not see within from the late sunlight in the street; but he did not hesitate or pause to measure the extent of his own temerity. He pulled open the door and strode inside.

He never brushed closer to death in his life, and he knew it. He could see it plain in the eyes of the man across the room with the

leveled gun. They were satanic eyes, even though the lower face was covered with shaving lather and a large towel was tied ridiculously around the man's neck.

It was the fugitive. Near him on the floor lay Brock Jorgan. He lay face down and stone dead, his gun still gripped in his hand. Slumped against one wall, eyes glazed and past human aid, Mal Jorgan sat dying. Cowering away from them, frozen with terror, were the barber, razor in hand, and the two young cow hands, clutching billiard cues.

"Easy, pardner, easy!" soothed Tamburlaine with authority, as he might have cooled down a wall-eyed bronc. "That'll be all the shootin' required."

The fugitive stood there. He was stumped. He didn't know what to do until it slowly sank in that he didn't have to do anything. The old man was unarmed. He wasn't the law. He looked harmless as dishwater. The fugitive would have killed him or anybody else at the flicker of an eylash, yet he did nothing. He merely said: "Who in hell are these two lobos? What's their game?

His voice was even enough.

"They're two that mean mighty little now," said Tamburlaine. "Their game is over. Put up the gun. Nothing more's to happen."

The fugitive, incredibly, believed him. He had to. He was like a man a little hypnotized. He even started to put the gun down inside his belt against his stomach – he wasn't wearing cartridge belt and holster – but he suddenly changed his mind.

"No, I reckon I'll keep this six-shooter kind of still in action. I don't know how this is going to come out."

"You ain't worried? Nobody here has a gun."

"It ain't that. I don't know even my own hole card in this game. But seems to me if the law ever gets inquisitive, you can tell 'em you did whatever you're thinkin' of doin' with my gun still thrown down on you."

Tamburlaine gave him a shrewd glance of appreciation. "That's right thoughtful."

"Don't mention it," snapped the other. "But I still don't know how this is going to come out. Just what's your play, now?"

Tamburlaine studied him. Neither the fugitive nor the others could read a thing in that rugged, unflinching old face.

"The play's up to you, son. I'm strictly lookin' on. Your horse is ready if you want him."

It was too much for the fugitive. He couldn't grasp yet what had happened. He couldn't figure this grim old man at all. In the midst of reaction, with the strain of days backing up on him, and mystery like a fog of doubt and fear gathering deeper about, he stumbled on one secure, familiar thing. His horse. Fed, watered, at least a little rested. Night coming, and a moon, and the safety of far, lone miles.

"You mean you got him saddled and standin'?"

"Just this minute. I figured on something like this."

The fugitive grimaced, almost smiled, thinly and bleakly. "Friend, some day I aim to come back here. With time and to spare. I'd admire actually to make your acquaintance. It oughtn't to take more than one year. All right, let's get that horse."

Tamburlaine led the way, with a last, unmoved look at the victims of the duel and a significant glance at the barber.

It was on the way along the street and into the yard, with everybody shying off at Tamburlaine's daunting eye and cool shake of the head, that the fugitive told in few words what had happened in the barber shop.

The Jorgans had crowded in just as he had settled in the chair for his shave. They had him cold – the coldest place you can get a man in any town. They stood on each side and asked personal questions. They seemed to know all the answers already but demanded the answer anyway.

It was a total blank mystery to the fugitive, and a crazy desperate one. Something about a feller named Jim Bentley and hiring out for a professional gunfighter and killing somebody. There was nobody else in town that fitted, so it must be him.

"Maybe you know their play, maybe you don't," said the fugitive somberly. "I got not time for finding out. I had no time for figuring them two. I had to call my bets fast, and no coppering 'em allowed. I reckon it'll be no news to you that I'm wanted. It don't matter where or how.

"But there's even a reward; that is the thing that signifies. You got no idea how it signifies! The brush is full of lobos like them, looking for mavericks like me. Any maverick with a price on him.

"Well, I got no time to spare any day for swapping questions with hombres that can't mind their business – especially when their business turns out to be something to do with murder."

"What did you do?"

"I told them, real sudden, to stick 'em up. I explained to you earlier I was techy in chairs. I hung up my hat and my gun belt before I sat down. But I took my gun with me in my lap, out of sight under that big towel. That six-shooter's never far from me, and I know it like its maker. So when it come to the point where I had to do something, with my back in a corner, I told them to up with the hands. Well"–he shrugged –"they just didn't. They grabbed for their guns."

"I see," breathed Tamburlaine.

The parting in the yard was brief. Tamburlaine had no questions. There are times for talking, and they come to an end. This was an end. The fugitive was satisfied with the horse, glad for the extra fodder. He offered to pay and was refused.

"Well, I'll slope now, friend. You said the travelin's passable to the east?"

"It is. But if you tell me with your own mouth you figure on making south, I'll be obliged to repeat that to anyone that asks."

The other gave him a gimlet look. "Thanks! Right this minute then I'm plumb set and positive I'm makin' south."

"Don't change your mind," Tamburlaine said dryly.

The roan moved, stepping high. His rider looked back. "Adios!"

"Good luck, son!"

Tamburlaine watched them turn the corner of the stable. Then he took a deep slow breath and closed his eyes for an instant. After that he turned around slowly and headed for the house.

Julie was waiting in the door. She had stepped out not farther because instinct told her to wait there for his word. She did not know what had happened, could only pray for the crazy, stark

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MACHO

by S. OMAR BARKER

The young mule bargained with fate when he sought the death-menaced liberty of the wilderness; and like a mule, he won his point in his own way. But Macho came out of it with something that few mules can boast of!

THIS IS THE STORY of a mule—a mountain mule whose only name, besides the names all mules get called, was Macho. If you know the lingo of New Mexico you know what that means. It means his sire was one of those humbly obstinate, dwarfish yet power-muscled, dumbly shrewd, moth-eaten, jackass paradoxes called burros. His dam was a cream-dun, shrewish saddle pony out of a jumbled line of Spanish and Arabian stock. But Macho, whatever the magnificence of his ancient ancestry, was only a macho, with all of a regular mule's deviltry and none of his unconcern.

He was foaled in the black spruce high country of the Big Burn, with a dozen dark canyons, Hermit's Peak, far mesas and plains spread out below him. That was in May. Macho was

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already a fat, tight-skinned colt of nearly six months when Bill Forney came riding up from the Sepello and found his stray mare and her long-eared colt with half a dozen other hide-out ponies in the Big Burn.

The horses, wild from purpose rather than from actual fear, grouped themselves, high headed, at the edge of the Burn where two jumps and a snort would take them into the shadowy timber, and watched Forney approach. It was the mule colt's first view of one of the lords of creation, and curiosity made him step well out from his mother's side and pick his biggish sharp ears forward to see what the new animal might be like. Macho looked a couple of seconds, then flicked his tail and opened his mouth in the humorous first stanza of a bray.

The cream-dun mare, his mother, had seen humans—Bill Forney in particular—before, and she was not so amused. To her men meant saddles, harness, and a bridle on one's liberty. The rest of the wildies were getting ready to go. The cream-dun nickered anxiously for her big-eared baby to come on. She could see that Forney was letting down his rope.

Macho didn't see the rope, and he was no longer watching the man. He had glimpsed something vastly more interesting at the heels of Forney's saddle horse. Macho identified the ranchman's

black shepherd-bull-spaniel dog as a new kind of coyote. He knew coyotes. He had had fun before running and stamping at them when they came prowling around. He took a couple of swaggering steps forward, then circled at a playful trot toward the dog.

The cream-dun nickered once more and trotted out after him in a wider circle, one wary eye on the loop Forney was making. The rider stuck sudden spurs into his horse's sides and sped forward at a jerky, leaping run over the fallen logs of the Burn, his loop whistling. Old King, the dog at his heels, started trotting easily for a good lying-down place he had spotted a few yards from the trail.

At the same instant that Bill Forney let fly his loop and missed, Macho laid back his ears, sneak-trotted up behind the unsuspecting dog and turned loose a hailstorm of stamping blows at him with his slim, round hoofs. Old King, more scared and surprised than hurt, let out a yelp that frightened grouse out of the spruces half a mile away.

In the next second he recovered from his disgraceful tumble of fright and came back at the mule, snarling. Macho, busy at the moment with a triumphal bit of mule laughter, got a bad nip at his ankles before he realized it and fled in a high-headed, hee-hawing trot into the timber after his mother and the rest of the bunch, Old King barking at his heels and Bill Forney shouting and swearing at the dog to come back.

Old King came back all right, ears up, tail down and scurrying when Macho turned and charged him again. But the ranchman's chance to catch his mare and her freakish colt was gone and he rode home that night disgusted. Old King, following in his trail, trotted uneasily, with ever so frequent sidelong glances behind him; and Macho, nuzzling and nipping at his mother's neck under a big bedding spruce on the head of Bear Creek, nevertheless stamped uneasily with the sting of the "black coyote's" bite above a front hoof. A feud, droll, playful, and yet tinged with hatefulness, had commenced between the burro mule and Forney's dog.

It had no chance to break out again soon. A week later an October blizzard struck the Main Range and a foot of snow whitened the grass parks on the high spruce country. The storm caught the cream-dun mare, with Macho and five more pestle tails, on the head of Bear Creek, west of the Range whither they had run from Forney. The mare headed back eastward toward more familiar country, but the whip of the blizzard drove her back, the others single file behind her.

Cream-dun led Macho and the others, chilly, snowy backed, their manes and tails clinkering with tiny icicles, through the snow-roofed timber to a park at the head of Valle En Medio. Thin sprinklings of grass heads showed here above the snow. The older horses, snuffling their noses down into the whiteness, began to paw down to the grass.

Macho, his brown-gray ears now trimmed in a lace of white ice, shook himself, brayed rebelliously and stood for a few minutes watching the odd procedure of his dam. Then he edged up close to her and got his teeth down to the grass clumps almost as fast as her hoofs uncovered them. At first the mare tolerated him, but presently she got tired of being crowded away from the fruits of her labors. She squealed threateningly, nipped his neck sharply and turned to give him a spanking kick in the ribs.

Thereafter Macho dug out his own grass. He learned the trick of it quickly, pawing first with one hoof and then the other. It was great fun in a foot of fresh fluffy snow, but by mid-winter storm upon storm had packed deep drifts over the bunch grass of the glades and the round fat ponies began to show hollow flanks under their shaggy winter coats. The cream-dun tried to find a way out down the ridges to the Pecos, but the wind had laid great drifts in the lee of every timber clump and she had to give it up.

Macho, somehow, fared better than the others. The burro in his blood made him more omnivorous. He even nibbled the grayhair moss from the tree trunks around the spring and seemed to get nourishment from it.

Death in two persons stalks the silent parks of the high country in winter. He comes in the slow, gaunt specter of

starvation, and grips his victims with the white claws of every blizzard until at last they must lie down in hungry, head-dropping surrender as the snow sifts over them. Macho, silent of his braggart braying now, saw two of his companions lie down thus and die.

Then one clear, cold night another death, tawny and swift, leaped upon the cream-dun and Macho where they lay bedded close under a snow-roofed spruce. Macho somehow sensed the cougar's presence and was on his feet even as the long cat leaped. He felt claws rip the skin of his hams as he sprang away in a braying panic; but even as he fled his heels flew up and knocked the tawny cat sprawling for a second.

With a spitting snarl the cougar crouched and sprang again. This time the cream-dun, squealing shrilly, stood between the cat and Macho. It was a brave gesture and it accomplished its purpose; it saved her colt. But the cougar wanted meat and he had no marked preferences. The mare would do as well as the colt. His snarl was suddenly muffled in the flesh of her neck as his sharp teeth sank deep into the life of Macho's brave little dam.

The other ponies fled panic-stricken, plunging madly through drifts up to their breasts. One of them, muscleless from hunger, floundered down in a drift and stayed there. For a moment Macho ran in terror, but his heart was obstinate. The claw scratches on his ham smarted. He stopped, gave one hoarse, raucous "haw" and started back to see why the cream-dun did not come on.

Foolhardy, he sneak-footed up to where the big cat was beginning his feast and struck out at him with swift front feet. A sharp-clawed paw caught his leg and ripped bone-deep grooves down it and he ran off again, this time to safety. For the cougar, empty stomached, had no time to take from his feast to pursue a mule colt.

Nor did he follow the trail of Macho and the other ponies later. He seemed to have had his fill of horse meat, and a hanker for venison led him on down over crusty drifts that would carry

his weight to the lower aspen ridges where the deer were. Macho and the two remaining ponies saw no more of him nor his kin that winter. It was well enough for them that they didn't because the white death of starvation was all they had strength enough left to fight.

Somehow the three did survive until spring uncovered a sunny slope or two where there still was grass. Here, still shaggy and nobby with meatless bones, still too weak to run away from a fat saddle horse, Bill Forney found them in May and drove them out. Old King nipped playfully at Macho's heels on the home trail, but the shanky, shaggy colt kicked back so weakly at him and brayed in such a harassed tone that Forney made the dog let him alone.

At Solano's place Forney left the two ponies and put a rope on Macho to lead him on home. Macho reared wildly at the first touch of the rope, but came along docilely enough when he found resistance futile.

Forney turned him free into a meadow ankle deep in rich timothy grass and the shaggy young mule knew the luxury of a full belly for the first time in months.

In a month he had begun to shed his shaggy coat, and was getting sleek and growing again. He had some spare time from eating now and he used it in most aggravating and surprising ways. One of these was to charge into the little bunch of milk cows in the pasture, nipping their backs sharply and scattering them to the edges of the meadow. He like to chase the calves, too, pretending to stamp at them fiercely.

Even so, Macho was lonesome; none of the animals in the pasture would play with him. They seemed either afraid or, like one old horse, viciously hateful. He missed the free and easy romps of the summer before with the cream-dun and the other wildies among the criss-cross logs of the Big Burn. He tried romping with old Durgin and got badly bitten for his pains, but he managed to land a spanking kick in the old horse's slats before he ran *awing-ee-awing* to safety.

He reopened his feud with Old King with great gusto, when

that black individual came trotting across the pasture one day, nosing into gopher hills. Macho brayed a challenging greeting. Old King snarled threateningly and tried to go on about his business; but Macho followed him at a sneaking walk, charging upon him whenever he seemed least to expect it, until finally the dog turned and the two put on a noisy, nose-to-nose battle of barking and braying, snapping and stamping, that sounded like a pack of wolves baying a hoarse hippopotamus.

Somebody called to the dog from the ranch house, but every time he started to go Macho came nipping at his tail and the battle was renewed. Finally Forney himself came out.

"Hey, you durned no-'count son of a burro!" he shouted whanging a swift rock into Macho's ribs. "Cut it out! King—let that scrub mule alone or I'll beat yuh! Git to the house now!"

Macho ran off kicking up his heels defiantly and the dog trotted offended and crestfallen to the house.

That afternoon Forney and another man ran Macho into the corral, whisked a rope over his neck, another on his heels and stretched him out.

"Maybe this here'll take some of the friskiness outa yuh, Macho *machito!*" remarked Forney as he stuck a red-hot iron to the mule's shoulder.

All at once Old King, crouching craftily, sneaked through the fence and ran to Macho's choke-windy nostrils behind Forney's back. The hot iron and the nip of Old King's teeth happened at about the same instant. It was too much. Something like a volcanic eruption happened suddenly under Bill Forney's knee. The rope on Macho's heels snapped in two with a pop and Macho, pawing and hawing, scrambled to his feet madly and charged toward where Old King had now retreated under the fence. As he went he knocked the branding iron from Forney's hand and sprawled the helper on the ground.

The man grabbed a piece of plank as he got up and came at Macho cursing. He got in one spanking whack across the young mule's hips before Forney stopped him, but one whack was enough for Macho; he set back so suddenly on the rope that it snapped in two. With a parting flick of his heels he sped across

the corral to the board gate. The infuriated helper started after him with a new club.

"I'll teach ye!" he gritted. "I'll kill me a damn jackass fer that!"

"Hey, cut it out! He's only a colt!" Forney shouted, running after him. Forney got to him just in time to yank him back out of the reach of a swift pair of heels. Then Macho, as if it were only one of the fallen logs in the Big Burn, took a flying leap over the gate. He crashed the top board, but went over, and fled high-trotting off up the pasture, his head held high in a raucous, triumphant, stuttering bray. Once out in the grass he stopped and rolled over, trying to rub off the sting from his shoulder, but the brand was there to stay.

That was the beginning of Macho's disrespect for gates. That same day he watched Forney shove back the latch on one and open it. As soon as the man had gone on, Macho advanced to try his luck. For ten minutes he alternately nosed at the sliding latch and shoved against the gate with his shoulders, until finally, inch by inch he got the latch back and swung the gate open. He trotted through, nose to the ground and ringing his tail mischievously.

The gate didn't let him out to liberty, but it did provide him with some new fun, for it was the gate into Forney's hog pasture. Chasing hogs, with their swift dodging and resentful squeal-grunts, he found to be even more fun than stamping at Old King. Presently he saw one coming on the run from the house. He gave one more stamp at a frothing old sow and scampered back through the gate, bucking and he-hawing up the meadow. The next time he tried that gate it was tied with rope and he couldn't get up enough enthusiasm to jump it.

He was fat now and beginning to feel a strange hanker for the liberty of the high country where there were no fences and no men to fling rocks at him whenever he tried to amuse himself.

Then one morning he saw Bill Forney and another man on horseback riding up the trail lane. They led two pack horses and Old King trotted at their heels. When Macho left off grazing to run up and down along the f e n c e, both his nose and his eyes

recognized one of the pack ponies as one of the two wildies that had wintered with him up in the country of black trees and white death. He paused to bray questioningly and to his delight the pony turned his head from the lead rope enough to nose-nicker briefly in recognition.

Macho ran up and pushed his shoulder against the fence. The tight barbwires pricked him sharply. Already he had learned that barbwire wasn't to be fooled with like plank gates. He galloped anxiously up and down as far as the corner of the pasture, but there was no gate on this side and the little cavalcade passed on out of sight up the trail into the timber, leaving Macho running frantic circles in the pasture, snorting and braying in his anxiety to follow them.

It took him an hour to think of it but finally, after a dozen stalled starts at jumping the fence, he found a spot where the wire was high across a canyon sag, and crawled under. It took hair and some skin off his back, but his stilty lope around to the end of the lane was one of triumph, nevertheless.

His nose soon picked up the trail, identifying the track-smell of the pony he had recognized. He followed eagerly on up over a steep ridge, down into the Beaver Canyon, up it and so on to the old familiar Big Burn. There he caught up with the cavalcade, celebrating the joy of his arrival by a hurricane swoop upon old King that sent him scurrying under a tangle of fallen timber. In spite of himself Bill Forney laughed.

"Better look out, Macho, young sprout, or a b'ar'll git yuh! I wouldn't care much if one did!"

Bill Forney and his neighbor, Frank Solano, were out for bears. Grizzlies had been killing cattle on the Valle En Medio and they came now with four huge traps to rid the range of the beef-butchering bruins. There was a cattlemen's association reward out, and then there would be the fun. It would, however, have been all fun and no bear, as it happened, without Macho.

The two ranchmen hunters found that the tales of grizzly cow butchery had not been exaggerated. Within a mile of where they made camp under a lone clump of spruces in a grassy glade they

found seven carcasses, some of them well eaten and old, but one showing plainly that it was the work of the night before. Only the flank and hams were eaten out, and even Forney, old mountaineer that he was, drew in his breath in a surprised whistle at the size of the padded tracks in the moist earth about the kill.

The men built trap pens and set three of their huge steel traps. They returned to their outdoor, tentless camp under the spreading shelter of the big spruce with their hopes high.

They had staked one of the pack ponies in the glade and Macho had chosen to stay with him. They returned to camp to find Old King backed up against their bedrolls doing his snarling darnedest to keep the inquisitive brown-gray nose of the young mule from investigating the camp.

"Hey, Macho! Git outa there!" yelled Forney, slanting a rock into his ribs. "Yuh let Ol' King alone, now, or we'll use yuh for bear bait!"

"Putty good idea for sure!" grinned Solano as the mule went off at a tail-whisking gallop to graze in the glade. "The grizzly, she's a-like *carne de burro* putty good!"

Next morning the hunters went to their trap in high expectancy, and returned to camp crestfallen. There had been bear around—even within half a mile of camp—the big one, another one smaller, but still large enough to get excited about, and two cubs about the size of Old King. But they had not been near the trap; they had run down a big cow in another glade across the canyon from the trap and killed her.

So it continued. Forney and Solano made new sets at new kills both that morning and the next; but without luck. The big raiders evidently liked their meat warm, for they slaughtered it fresh every night, apparently in utter contempt of the man-camp so nearby, and they never returned to a kill. It was almost uncanny. Hunt and track as they might, the men never succeeded in getting within sight of any one of the grizzlies.

The men slept with loaded rifles at their sides. Bears as bold as these might venture into camp in the dark of night. They had Old King, curled up at their feet, to rely on for the alarm in case such a thing should happen, and so they slept soundly on their open

air, spruce bough bed. It was the third night that something happened.

Sometime after midnight both men sat up in bed as suddenly as jacks-in-the-box. Their hands seized their rifles even while their eyes still stuck dazedly shut with sleep. Out in the blackness only a few feet away from them Old King was snarling and baying, his barks a strange mixture of fear and defiance.

"Bear!" breathed Forney, cocking his rifle and bringing it to his shoulder.

Gradually their eyes could make out what seemed to be a huge, dark shape moving nearer as Old King's barking grew fiercer and closer.

"He's a big 'un!" breathed Forney. "Better both shoot—to make sure! An' keep shootin'! See 'im, Frank?"

"Uh-huh!" Solano's voice had a slightly fearful tremble to it. "We shoot now—both on the same time!"

"Now!"

Suddenly out of the dark, moving shadow, a big head appeared in black outline against the horizon. Even in the darkness its identity was unmistakable. Its ears were long and waggling, and as it came up a hoarse gargling sound broke in upon old King's barking. The sound grew to a raucous, echoing bray. It was Macho.

All in the same instant a shot cracked out from Solano's rifle. But Forney's perception had been a hundredth of a second quicker, and his hand knocked the rifle barrel up.

The taunting, humorous bray sank suddenly to a groaning snort and Old King's clamor subsided into a chasing bark as there came through the night the sound of galloping mule hoofs.

"Gosh ding! I'm afeerd yuh hit him, Frank!" exclaimed Forney.

"Malvado!" grunted Solano. "I'm glad if I keel him! That Macho is make fool of ever'body!"

Presently Old King came back, wagging his tail in a gratified manner as if he had done a hard duty well. From then on the night was silent. And the next morning Macho was nowhere in sight.

"Kinder sorry to of killed the scrub," said Forney, surmising that was what had happened. "Them Machos has got lots o' bottom an' he'd make a mighty good little work animal!"

But Macho had not been killed. They spied him at a distance, low-headed under a black spruce, as they returned disappointed again from their traps along toward noon. But when they tried to go to him to investigate whatever wounds he might have, the young mule showed them his heels and slunk off into the woods.

Macho, with one big ear crumpled down painfully and forlornly by the knife of a whizzing bullet, wanted no more human and canine company. That combination seemed to have a way of hurting him that was outrageous. He skulked well back in the timber and what grazing he did that day was in another glade. Nor did he return when gray dusk became the black crystal of high country night. He got up and down fretfully as the night wore on and then, too nervous for either rest or forage, finally decided to amble back to the company of the camp horses in the other glade. A thin, late moonlight lighted his going.

As he came to the edge of the aspens a quarter of a mile from the camp, he became suddenly aware of a something chunky and black moving along the fringe of the glade. A peculiar whiff of rather fearful scent was in the air, but the animal looked, in the moon-dusk, like Old King. Macho's one good ear lay back on his head vindictively. On soft-stepping, silent hoofs he ambled through the bunch grass toward his supposed enemy. Ten steps from the animal he leaped suddenly forward. The black object started to run swiftly for the timber. With a squealing snort Macho caught up with it and struck with swift front hoofs.

"Ba-aw-aw-ma-aw!"

The night silence was suddenly clamorous with the half childlike, half calflike distress squawl of a cub grizzly. Another cub Macho had not seen, added its voice questioningly from the aspens.

To Macho all raucous noises were challenges. He brayed loudly. His stamping had turned the bear cub back into the glade and Macho galloped like a hurricane after him.

"Bawww-awww-gr-r-awww www!"

From a few steps up the glade came the roaring answer of a grizzly mother as she turned back from her quest of fresh beef to the rescue of her babies. Huge as she was, she came like a hurtling thunderbolt down the glade. Macho stopped a second to look as he glimpsed her. Then terror took sudden hold on him. Instinctively he turned to flee toward the safety of Forney's horses and camp; but the cub was still scared witless, too, and fled ahead of him, the big bear gaining from behind. The night was by turns a silent sounding board for the grass-muffled sounds of running feet and the hullabaloo of squawling bears. Only the dead could have failed to waken at it.

Down the glade they came, Macho and the cub a hurricane duo of fright, the old she-grizzly roaring behind them like Old Lady Doom in person. Macho dodged to one side and slowed down. He felt rough claws reaching his hams and fled again. From campward came the sound of Old King's excited barking. Horses snorted and yanked at their stake ropes in the *vega.*

All at once the bear squawling ceased as the cub stopped and his huge mother reached him, bowling him over in her rushing anxiety. Macho sped on. He met and passed the two men, barefooted and in their underwear, and circled into the snorting horses, himself snorting windily.

Suddenly swift shots cracked commandingly into the quieting turmoil of sound. Red flame spurted like hot knives in the darkness. The old she-grizzly, now ambling grumblingly away, stopped, squawled and charged back toward the flame spurts. New spears of fire answered her, once, twice, half a dozen times. Her threatening growl died in a gurgle as she tumbled in a heap in the grass. The men, white-legged in their underwear, ran forward again, firing. Then, with surprising suddenness, all the clamor except the nervous stamping and nostril snorting of horses, ceased.

Bill Forney and Solano went back to their bedrolls with cold feet and chattering teeth, but too elated to notice either. If you have ever killed two grizzlies in one night with only the half light of a waning moon to shoot by, you can understand why.

Macho, let it be said, got no credit for the success of the bear hunt, nor did he claim any. But when two more nights of trapping netted the other cub and a yearling grizzly, Macho drew a new and unexpected share in the burden of the expedition. The weight of the green bear hides and skulls would make the packs too heavy for two ponies, so Forney roped Macho, now a grotesque-looking specimen with one wilted ear, and lashed a pack on him.

As if he had inherited the instinct of burden bearing from his patient burro ancestors, Macho made very little fuss about it. Instead he kept his eye on Old King in case that worthy should try to take advantage of his situation.

Thus Macho, born a wild 'un, now at less than two years of age walked along docilely on a lead rope tied to a horse's tail and carried a pack across the mountains to the Forney ranch. Once while stopped on the trail for wind, Old King sneaked up to nip his heels, but when Forney swore and slapped him away he took his place behind the last horse and bothered Macho no more.

Rebellion rose strongly in the young mule's heart when, passing through the Big Burn, he saw a bunch of wild ponies go high-tailing off into the timber, free as the clouds. He gave a protesting bray and setback on his lead rope, but it held and he passed down out of the free high country to the green *vegas* of the Sapello ranches, prisoner to a rope.

He did not stay a prisoner long after Forney slapped him loose into the pasture. He grazed himself a bellyful and then, remembering sharply those wildies running free in the fenceless pastures of the Big Burn, Macho began a series of gate openings and fence crawlings that took him through the hog pasture and finally out to the road, whence he headed up-canyon at a determined trot. He slowed to a walk when he took the night-shadowed trail toward the Big Burn, but daylight found him capering with new-found wild pony companions, up where the sunrise is a red round glory far off below at the rim of distant plains.

He spent a happy month before there was a round-up of the ponies and Forney got him again.

From then on he learned to work. At three years old he was already a steady puller in harness, a stout pack mule, and thoroughly worth his salt. He was also what Forney called a "damned nuisance."

"Him an' that dog forever pickin' a quarrel with each other is enough to drive a feller mad!" declared Forney.

Every summer, however they might watch him, Macho managed somehow to take his "vacation" with other runaways up in the Big Burn country. Sometimes it would be a week, sometimes two months, before Forney got him back.

Then one autumn Bill Forney, tired of broken gates, dog-feuds and trampled hogs, didn't bring him in. The cowboys from the Pecos side left him after their round-up, together with two runty bays, mother and colt, to run free as they chose.

The crisp tang of autumn was in the air and the zest of it put vigor in Macho's veins that seemed to transform him from a grotesque, runty mule to some proud lord of the wilderness. He led his two followers off into the timber with the bravado of a conqueror.

He had forgotten the white death that wings in each winter from the east to cover the grass and grip its claws of cold and hunger tighter and tighter upon those few animals who dare to stay in the high country. But it came, nevertheless, even as it had come that first winter when the cream-dun died by cougar teeth on the Valle En Medio. By New Year's Day the runty bay colt was but a carcass under the snow, his mother ready to topple over with her boniness; and Macho himself was lean of flank and shank.

He had stayed near the Big Burn spring and now when he pawed the snow, half the time it was to uncover rotting logs of the Burn instead of grass. By February the bay mare was dead, and the zest of liberty in the high country had departed from Macho with the shrinking of his flesh. A dozen times after the piled-up drifts had blocked the trails, Macho tried to make his way down toward the Aspen Saddle and so to the homeward trail. Memories of other snug winters at the Forney feed-rack haunted him.

When the bay mare lay a week dead a new storm came and Macho, with the obstinacy of his breed, set out facing it to try the trail once more. For hours he wallowed in drifts that smothered him like fluffy feathers and dragged him down like quicksand. Instinct told him the direction, and blind hunger drove him on. If he had been a mere horse he would have stood and starved, but his sire had been a burro. Burros do not starve.

Sifty with whiteness in the black timber, night came with the storm, and still Macho struggled blindly down drift-ridden steeps. Once he rolled headlong over a low cliff and was an hour getting to his feet again. He brayed weakly, a plaintive squeak in the great sifting silence, and struggled on.

Sometime in the night the storm died out, and when morning came the sunrise flooded the mountains with a vast, cold glistening. On the trail that sloped up out of Beaver Canyon over the ridge toward the Sapello, the white perfection was broken by a spot of wet, bony, big-eared, gray ugliness plodding slowly up the hill. Macho had somehow fought his way through the drifts. Here the snow was no more than a foot in depth. By noon, near the ridge-top, he found sprangly grass heads showing through the snow and stopped to browse them hungrily.

In an hour food in his stomach had given him enough ambition to paw down to better bunches under the snow, and he went at it with new vim. Something of the old cockiness crept back into his one good ear, steaming in the now warming sun and waggling as he browsed. He had battled with the white death and won.

Suddenly, silently, crouching low in the snow, a long tawny body appeared at the edge of the snow-festooned aspens behind him. Slowly it crept forward. A breath of air stirred along the slope. The scent it brought to Macho's nostrils made his head come up with a snort of terror. It was the same death-smell of that first winter on Valle En Medio when the cougar had killed his dam. His nose remembered it. He turned his head and saw the cougar crouched behind him.

At his movement the big cat leaped. One long jump . . . two . . . three. It was too late to run. Macho raised his heels frantically. He felt sharp claws scratch his hocks but the

cougar sprawled back in the snow. In an eyewink it was up and springing upon him. Macho kicked again. One hoof thudded heavily against the tawny body, but the claws caught this time and clung for a second to his kicking heels, scratching deeply. A swift bite almost deadened the tendons in one leg and when the cougar sprang upon him again Macho's wobbly kick missed and the killer landed high up on his hips and clung.

Pain and terror brought sudden, frantic strength to Macho's worn-out muscles. He bucked fiercely in a mad, jiggety motion, and when that failed to dislodge the cougar, he threw himself flat on the slope and rolled over and over down the hill. The cat stuck like a cockleburr, its long tail switching, but as the mule went over his weight crushed the wind from its lungs and Macho came up bleeding but for the moment free. He whirled into the aspens and circled behind a thick clump of whiteberry bush.

The cougar, naturally short-winded as cougars are, got up gasping and came on in a spitting, snarling crouch. Shaky and trembling Macho faced it. He seemed to sense instinctively the hopelessness of flight. His legs shook with terror and weakness, but he brayed a hoarse challenge and pawed the snow with wobbly fierceness, afraid to run. Ten feet from him the cougar crouched to spring again, its tail twitching. Its green eyes were upon the mule's head now. It would not miss again.

Suddenly the cougar's flat ears raised straight up on its head. For half a second its tail stopped writhing. The sharp sound of a dog's eager yelp cut into the air from up at the edge of the aspens. The tawny cat turned its head to look. Snarling, it hesitated a second and then sprang with stiff-haired neck down the hill past Macho. But it had paused too long.

With an eager, fighting yelp Old King leaped upon it, his teeth snapping like knives, and the two animals suddenly became one rolling, twisting knot of snarling and spitting in the snow. For a second they rolled together. Then the cougar sprang suddenly free. Six feet up the hill it turned, jaws open, one threatening paw raised, to face the dog. Snarling, a blood rip showing in the black hair of his side, Old King came on, straight into those

deadly jaws. Long claws raked his shoulder as he closed in. His teeth slashed and missed.

All at once Macho, ringing his tail, a hoarse bray in his throat, plunged forward. He reared as he came and his front hoofs, like two round hammers, smashed down upon the cougar's tawny back. The big cat's snarl changed suddenly to a mad yowl of pain. Macho's hoofs came down again like leaded flails. The cat turned to fight this new assailant and Old King, quick to see the opening, leaped in to its throat.

Twenty minutes later Bill Forney, riding a hard-blown, sweating horse, a rifle ready in his hands, trailing the running tracks of Old King upon the cougar trail they had been following, came upon a strange scene in an aspen grove near the trail.

In the midst of a patch of wallowed snow, red with great splotches of blood, lay the tawny body of a dead cougar, his neck chewed to a pulp and the bones of his hind quarters broken and crushed.

A few feet off to one side stood a bony, thigh-bleeding mule with a most familiar wilted ear. The mule had his head down. Almost beside it sat Old King, licking his wounds. As Forney rode upon the scene the dog got up and came to meet him. But before he came he paused, a peculiar little wag to his tail, and gave a friendly lick at Macho's nose. And the mule's response, instead of striking hoofs, was a soft, throaty sound—the nearest a mule can make to a friendly nicker.

Macho trailed the ranchman home that afternoon, wobbly but determined; and at his heels, with never a nip nor a snarl, trotted Old King.

The black spruces that fringe the Big Burn shaded the usual bunch of wildies the next summer, but Macho was not among them. He had bargained with fate: the death-menaced liberty of the wilderness for the security of harness and feed-rack. He had had his fling as a wild 'un; now he accepted his destiny as a mule, a mule, nevertheless, with something few mules can boast: the comradely, frolicsome friendship of a dog.

THE SEVENTH SHOT

The called him The Black Wolf—El Lobo Negro—and his humor was to send a black bullet to the man he intended to kill, with a note that he had six more to deliver, but with considerably more force.

EL LOBO NEGRO had promised to kill Buck Harris, and in that particular section of southern Arizona down near the Mexican border the word of El Lobo Negro—"the Black Wolf"—came very near being law.

It *was* law on the other side of the Border. The fact that it fell short of being law on the Arizona side was due almost entirely to the presence of Buck Harris, the big, good-natured owner of the Circle H Ranch. Consequently, El Lobo had announced to that part of the world in general that he was going to rid himself of Harris' very inconvenient presence.

He made the announcement in a crudely lettered note that was found placed neatly on the center of the table in the Circle H bunkhouse one morning. The note was weighted down by a revolver cartridge of heavy caliber, a cartridge that was painted solid black from nose to cap.

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by HAL K. WELLS

The message read: "Senor Harris—This is a sample fang of the Black Wolf. There are six more like it in my gun waiting for you, amigo, when next we meet.—El Lobo Negro."

Buck Harris merely laughed as he carelessly put the black bullet in his pocket and rolled the warning note up as a lighter for his cigarett from the bunkhouse fire. There was nothing particularly surprising about finding the note and the cartridge. The incident was merely one of those dramatic gestures typical of El Lobo.

If El Lobo Negro had any other name the Border country had never heard it. His picturesque Mexican sobriquet of "the Black Wolf" fitted him like a buckskin glove. Even his nationality was uncertain. He was neither Negro nor Mexican. There was a hint of Yaqui in the high cheekbones of his swarthy face, but no Yaqui was ever able to swear as fluently in both Portuguese and Italian as El Lobo Negro did upon occasion. The Border put him down as a "breed" of unusually mixed ancestry, and let it go at that.

He was the leader of as viciously efficient a little gang of Mexican thugs and renegade Americans as ever operated in that section of the Border country. The gang's specialty was smuggling, and they cared little whether the contraband to be brought across the line consisted of liquor, drugs, or human freight in the form of Chinese and other aliens. The Circle H Ranch, located thirty miles north of the Border, would have made an ideal receiving station for contraband. Accordingly, El Lobo went to Buck Harris with a straight business proposition. Then the fireworks started.

"Why, yuh mangy, slinkin', sand hill coyote!" Harris exploded after he had digested El Lobo's amazing offer. "I wouldn't have nothin' tuh do with yore hop and Chinaman business if yuh was tuh offer me a million dollars bonus on every blasted pigtail. Ramble on outa here, and ramble pronto. I won't turn yuh intuh the Guv'ment men because I don't do things thet way, but if I ever ketch yuh prowlin' around the Circle H again I'm gonna print my initials on yore nose with a fistful uh knuckles. Now, git!"

El Lobo was then foolish enough to try to threaten Harris. It was a grave error. Harris had been merely peeved before, but now he became playful, and the big rancher's ideas of play were much the same as those of a grizzly bear. El Lobo was powerful, but he was no match for the two hundred and ten pound Harris. The rancher grabbed the outlaw up in his massive arms and flung him into a horse trough.

The outraged outlaw leader rode away, streaming water and threats. The next morning the black bullet and the note of

warning were found on the bunkhouse table. That had been a week ago and nothing whatever had happened since. Harris had not expected anything to happen. In fact, he had completely dismissed the outlaw from his mind an hour after finding the warning note.

Tonight Harris was enjoying himself in a sociable little draw poker session in "Pedro's Shack," located some five miles this side of the line. Ample proof of Harris' utter disregard for El Lobo's threats was found in the fact that though he was far from the security of the Circle H Ranch his sole companion was Chuck Lash, his lean, dour-faced foreman.

There were six men gathered about the poker table over by the window—Harris, Chuck Lash, two cowboys from another ranch, and a couple of men from one of the group of copper mines half a dozen miles to the east.

Harris had unbuckled his cartridge belt for comfort's sake, and the belt with its holstered six-gun hung over the back of his chair. With his wide-brimmed felt hat pushed back over a heavy mop of blond hair, to which the early forties had brought no gray as yet, the big rancher sprawled there at ease in his creaking chair like some huge, genial grizzly bear. His sheer size made him look ponderous and awkward. Yet, like the grizzly, Harris could move with a terrible and deceptive speed when aroused.

One of the mine men looked at his two-card draw, then shoved a stack of chips into the center of the table. "It'll cost you gents just ten blues," he announced.

Harris looked at his own one-card draw, then shoved in two stacks of blues. "Let's bump it ten," he suggested.

"Suits me," agreed the mine man. "This here hand of mine is a real curly wolf, and I'd be plumb foolish not to let it prowl. See you, and ten better."

Harris grinned and came back with still another raise. This time the mine man merely called. Harris laid down four deuces. The mine man disgustedly slammed a jack-full on tens down on the table.

"What it takes to tame curly wolves I guess you've got!" he admitted.

"Mebbe," agreed Harris genially.

"Includin' black wolves in thet, are yuh, Buck?" asked one of the cowboys banteringly.

Harris merely grinned. "Deal me out this hand," he requested. "I smell somethin' good back there in the corner that oughta be personally investigated." He rose from the table and headed for the curtained-off corner at the rear where Pedro was busy over a cook stove.

Save for the six poker players, the big single room of the "Shack" was deserted. It was a rather more pretentious resort than its name indicated. It was lighted brilliantly by two big electric light bulbs overhead, the current being cut in from a mine line that passed nearby. At one side of the big room was a small, heavy bar where Pedro on occasion served tequila, mescal, red liquor, and good Mexican beer. A stack of chairs and tables piled over near the other wall testified to the usual popularity of the place.

Carelessly leaving his belt and gun over the back of the chair, Buck Harris went on back into the corner behind the curtain. It was merely a makeshift little kitchen, lighted by one of the powerful ceiling bulbs of the big room outside, and equipped only with a small wood-burning stove. The dapper, grinning little Pedro was stirring a pot of pungently seasoned Mexican beans. Harris dumped a generous portion of the steaming beans into the thin sheet of flexible dough into a rough cylinder.

He had just taken his first bite from the bean-filled roll when there was a sharp clink and with startling suddenness every light in the "Shack" went out. There was a prompt chorus of surprise and disgust from the little group of poker players. Then a blast of colder air swept the big room as someone flung the outer door wide open, and there was the swift rush of feet over the wooden floor as unseen invaders slipped into the room.

Flinging his tortilla aside, Harris came to life abruptly. Someone had obviously taken advantage of the poker players' preoccupation to slip the front door open far enough to reach a hand in to the main light switch on the wall near the door. Then that some one had used the sudden darkness to cover an

entrance. It bore all the earmarks of a hold-up. Harris reached for his gun, then grunted softly in disgust as he remembered that his belt and revolver were still draped over the back of a chair at the poker table.

Moving in the darkness with a speed and silence almost incredible in one of his bulk, the rancher slipped the curtain aside and stepped back into the main room. Then he stepped back into the main room. Then he stopped abruptly and froze motionless as a too-familiar voice came from the utter darkness over by the bar.

"Just hold everything gentlemen, please!" The order was in the insolent, smooth drawl of El Lobo Negro. "Just one little move and somebody dies. You were not expecting company to drop in—no?"

Harris was strongly tempted to try rushing the outlaw in the dark, but he thought better of it. The creaking floor boards as he moved forward would be almost sure to give him away.

El Lobo was obviously talking to the group at the poker table. Over by the window they were dimly visible in the reflected moonlight from outside, while the darkness was absolute where the outlaw was standing. The spectacular and dramatic stunt of entering in the dark was typical of El Lobo. Harris wondered how many more of the gang were outside.

"I could hold you up—no?" the outlaw continued, taunting the group at the poker table. "But why should I do that? We are all amigos—yes? I drop in for just a little drink of Pedro's tequila. Maybe you will join me. But first you shall listen to the snarl of the Black Wolf!"

The "snarl" came immediately in the form of a staccato ripple of shots from a six-gun. The heavy bullets splintered into the wall uncomfortably close to the group at the table, yet none of the men made a false move. They could have taken a chance and fired at the orange flashes in the dark over by the bar, but the odds were a little too heavy against them.

The sixth and last shot was apparently a signal, for the lights were promptly snapped on again, revealing El Lobo standing by

the bar and a companion over by the light switch. The tall, rangy outlaw showed his white teeth in a flashing smile at the effect of his little bit of drama.

The smoking gun in El Lobo's hand was seemingly the property of the burly, red-headed individual at the switch, for the outlaw leader's own weapon still swung untouched in a holster at his hip. El Lobo beckoned the redhead over to his side and handed him the empty weapon for reloading.

"And now we have peace again, amigos, El Lobo assured the poker players. "Tequila, Pedro!" As he turned to order the drink El Lobo for the first time saw Buck Harris. His hand promptly streaked for his hip, then stopped midway as he noted that Harris was unarmed.

"There's his artillery, on thet chair," volunteered the redhead, jerking a dirty thumb in the direction of the poker table.

A smile of sardonic glee creased El Lobo's swarthy features as he realized Harris' plight. The big rancher was poised there tense and alert on the balls of his feet, but he knew that any attempted move toward the outlaw would be equivalent to suicide. The wolf is not an animal noted for either chivalry or sportsmanship, and El Lobo was notorious for his likeness to his namesake in those traits. He had shot unarmed men before, and jeered at them as he did it.

Wise in the ways of gunplay, the players at the poker table rose quietly but hurriedly and drifted toward the door. Chuck Lash tried to slip carelessly out with them, but he was halted just short of the doorway by a sharp command from El Lobo.

Though the outlaw leader's gun was still in its holster, Lash cannily obeyed the order to halt. El Lobo was known to have the deadly speed of a striking snake on the draw. The four other poker players slipped on out into the night. The thud of their horses' feet a few seconds later told of their departure for other and safer parts.

The trembling Pedro also slunk toward the door, taking almost ludicrous care to avoid coming into the line of fire between either Harris or Lash and the two sinister figures over by the bar. El Lobo smiled contemptuously and let the frightened little cook

go. Pedro scuttled through the open door and vanished into the night, to hide somewhere nearby until he could safely return to whatever might be left of his property.

Only the four men were left in the big room – El Lobo and the redhead by the bar, Buck Harris standing back near the curtained-off kitchen corner, and Chuck Lash standing just a step or two inside the open front door. Outside the "Shack" there was an occasional prowling movement that told of the presence of at least one more member of El Lobo's gang out there, and possibly more.

The redhead, with his weapon again loaded, looked at El Lobo and then suggestively at Chuck Lash. The outlaw leader shook his head. Standing as he was, El Lobo could easily cover either Harris or Lash, and he apparently preferred to run the play himself. The redhead shrugged his shoulders and holstered his loaded gun.

Harris' lips tightened grimly as he read the expression of El Lobo's dark, blazing eyes. "The Wolf" was getting ready to kill, either with or without an excuse.

There was a six-gun on Chuck Lash's hip, but against El Lobo the foreman's weapon might as well have been locked in its holster, and every man there knew it. Lash, though reasonably accurate with a gun when once he had it in his hand, was notorious for his blundering slowness on the draw.

El Lobo knew that his own dazzling speed would hopelessly outclass the foreman if he went for his gun. So did Lash. Yet, reading sure death for Harris in the outlaw's smoldering eyes, Lash took the one desperate chance.

El Lobo's draw and shot seemed blended in one smooth, incredibly swift motion. Lash's groping fingers had barely clawed his gun free of its holster when the outlaw's bullet struck him. The foreman's weapon clattered to the floor as he lurched drunkenly to one side, clutching the doorsill in a game effort to hold himself erect.

Harris was charging like a rampant grizzly the second El Lobo began his draw. But the big rancher's mad effort was hopeless. The guns of both El Lobo and the redhead swung down on him before he was halfway across the room.

But Chuck Lash, though sick and dazed by the shock of El Lobo's bullet, had one last effort left in him. Fighting to keep his knees from buckling for just one second more, Lash made a desperate grab at the light switch near his hand. The effort was a success. For the second time that night, the lights in the "Shack" went abruptly out. Then Lash's knees failed him utterly and, half conscious, he fell sprawling out through the open door, landing heavily on the hard ground outside.

The extinguishing of the lights gave Harris the slight break he needed. He dropped to the floor like a rock. Both the outlaws' guns crashed a split second later, but too late. Both bullets missed. Harris crouched, half turned, then leaped for the chair at the table where his own belt and weapon were.

There was the crash of another shot from over near the bar. El Lobo had apparently guessed the rancher's goal for the bullet missed by inches only. Then Harris' outflung fingers found the butt of his own six-gun. He yanked the weapon from the holster just as another shot flamed, this time from over by the outer door. The bullet came close enough that he felt its hot blast upon his cheek.

His cartridge belt had slipped to the floor when he yanked his gun from its holster, but Harris had no time to retrieve it now. There was the sound of a brief struggle outside, and the heavy thud of a kick as El Lobo's prowling henchman viciously booted the helpless Chuck Lash in the body.

Another shot crashed from over by the door. Harris fired with lightning speed at the flash, then leaped swiftly to one side just as an answering shot from the bar whizzed through the place where he had just stood. There was the sound of a heavily falling body over by the door. Harris' swift shot in that direction had apparently found its mark.

"Manuel! The light switch — pronto!" The staccato order was in the voice of El Lobo, apparently entrenched safely behind the heavy bar. The henchman outside could reach swiftly in the door, Harris knew, and turn the switch without exposing any vulnerable part of himself.

If Harris remained in the open when the lights returned it

would instantly mean his death warrant. The big rancher dove headlong for the pile of empty packing boxes and tables along the wall behind him. He scrambled down behind the flimsy barricade just as the lights flashed on. He caught a fleeting glimpse of Manuel's vanishing arm and hand, but he had not time for even a snap shot.

There promptly came a shot from one of the cracks in the lower wall of the bar, behind which El Lobo was entrenched. Harris was untouched, but he hastily squeezed his big bulk down more compactly behind two large boxes that seemed to offer more solid protection than the thin boards of the piled-up tables.

Then there was a moment's pause while both combatants sized the situation up. Sprawled on the floor near the door was the limp body of the redhead. It needed only a glance at the grotesquely contorted form to know that the red-haired one was very definitely eliminated from that fight, and from all others as well.

The form of Chuck Lash was visible on the ground just outside the doorway, but there was no sign of life in the still figure. Somewhere outside, too, was Manuel. Harris dismissed any immediate danger from that source, however. He had the solid wall at his back, and his position commanded both the outer door and the single window by the poker table.

El Lobo apparently realized the siutation too, for he promptly called to the man outside. "Manuel," he commanded, "you can do no good here. It is possible we may need reinforcements to smoke out our big fat grizzly. Ride quickly, and return with our friends."

"Si, senor," came the prompt answer from outside, followed a minute later by the sound of a horse's flying feet as Manuel rode for help.

Harris wondered how far away the rest of El Lobo's gang was. He had a shrewd suspicion that the gang's temporary camp was probably in Red Cliff Canyon. It offered the best camp site for miles either way. If the gang was in Red Cliff Canyon, it would be only a matter of ten minutes or less before they would be

sweeping down upon their cornered quarry in overwhelming force.

Harris was relieved to note that Lash seemed to be coming slowly back to life there on the ground outside. His legs were twitching and he groaned once or twice. The foreman was out of range of El Lobo's position and was safe for the time being, at least. But Harris could expect no help from Lash, unarmed and wounded as the foreman was.

Then El Lobo opened fire again, and Harris forgot everything else in his grim wonder as to just how soon one of those heavy bullets would search out a weak place in his makeshift barricade and come ripping into his body. The advantage in position was all with El Lobo.

The lower wall of the bar, while not entirely bullet-proof, was solid enough that Harris could not even get a glimpse of the outlaw leader as El Lobo fired through various narrow cracks and crevices. Harris, on the other hand with his huge bulk crammed down behind the two relatively small packing boxes had his position clearly marked for the outlaw.

El Lobo was steadily and methodically pumping lead into the boxes, reloading after every fourth shot, thus always keeping a reserve of two loaded cartridges in his gun. Harris tried to gauge the outlaw's probable position from his last shot, then sent two bullets whizzing into the bar wall about a yard apart and close to the floor.

Neither bullet found its mark. There was a derisive laugh from behind the bar.

"One, two!" jeered El Lobo. "And another one that you used in the dark on poor Red there. Three bullets gone from your six-gun, amigo, and only three left. And your cartridge belt is out there on the floor quite out of your reach. What will you do, amigo, when those three little shots of yours are gone?"

Harris gasped in consternation. He had forgotten that vital belt of cartridges during the hectic battle in the dark. The belt was a good fifteen feet away, with El Lobo's ready and accurate gun covering every foot of the fifteen.

His three remaining shells would be practically useless as far as

any real offensive was concerned. Only by the wildest possible chance could he hope to even wing the concealed outlaw with one of the three. Yet if Harris remained where he was it would be only a matter of minutes before the whole gang would be upon him.

Jeering at the rancher's silent gun, El Lobo continued shooting from an apparently unlimited reserve supply of ammunition. As Harris sprawled still more closely down behind the boxes, he suddenly grunted as something in his vest pocket dug into his side. He promptly explored the pocket, then smiled in grim satisfaction as what he found there gave him a new idea. It was a wild scheme at best upon which to gamble those three precious shots, but it was at least worth a trial.

El Lobo was still methodically pumping lead into the boxes, obviously anxious to make his own kill before the gang came, if possible. It was upon this eagerness of El Lobo's that Harris was relying for the success of his ruse. The big rancher worked for a minute over his six-gun, and was ready.

At El Lobo's next shot there came in swift answer a series of three crashing reports from Harris' barricade, with an interval of two or three seconds between each shot. The bullets of that final desperate outburst splintered through the bar wall in a line close to the floor, but El Lobo was again untouched.

Then came the sound that was music to the outlaw's ears — the futile click as the hammer of Harris' gun fell on an empty shell, another harmless click as the cylinder was spun to still another unloaded chamber, then an outburst of disgusted profanity from the cornered rancher.

"And so the grizzly's claws are now clipped!" jeered El Lobo exultantly. "Three and three make six, and six from six leaves nothing. And now for the last act, amigo. No wolf was ever killed with an empty gun."

There was a stony silence from behind the rancher's barricade. Harris was hoping that the exultant El Lobo would rashly expose himself now that he believed the danger over, but the outlaw was too crafty for that. Instead, he merely moved to the end of the bar. From this new position he flanked Harris' protecting boxes,

while exposing nothing of himself except his gun as he poked it around the edge of the bar wall.

The piled-up tables offered little resistance to bullets. The leaden missiles crashed through so close that Harris flinched. He still had nothing to shoot at except El Lobo's exposed gun, and even that offered a poor target. But the outlaw's shots were ripping so dangerously close that Harris dared wait no longer.

He aimed as carefully as he could, then his six-gun belched forth with the utterly unexpected seventh shot. It was a direct hit. El Lobo yelped in surprised pain as his gun was knocked spinning from his hand.

With the shot, Harris was already up and charging upon the bar. Swift as his rush was, however, the rancher saw that it was going to be too late. El Lobo had swiftly recovered himself and, diving out into the open, his fingers were already reaching for his gun there on the floor. Without even checking his forward plunge, Harris swept a chair up and hurled it in one mighty effort.

El Lobo ducked and the chair merely grazed him. But it gave Harris the second's delay he needed. The next moment he had kicked the revolver over in a corner out of El Lobo's reach and closed with the outlaw.

Past master in all the tricks of dirty fighting, El Lobo lashed savagely upward with his knee. Harris dodged the attempted blow easily enough, but he had to relax his grasp for an instant as he did so. With a swift, lithe effort El Lobo writhed free. The outlaw's hand flashed under his coat and came out with an ugly, long-bladed knife.

Harris snorted in grim contempt and, poised alertly on the balls of his feet, he closed in cautiously upon the viciously waiting outlaw. It was a case of fanged wolf against unarmed grizzly.

El Lobo held his weapon in the manner of a real knife fighter, a foot or so in front of him just above the level of his belt, with the point slightly raised, ready for an upward ripping thrust to the body.

Harris covered the last yard between them in one swift step,

and dodged with lightning speed to his right just as El Lobo's hand flashed up. The knife barely grazed Harris' body. Then the big rancher's massive left fist crashed solidly just over El Lobo's heart.

As the outlaw's knees sagged from that terrific blow, Harris grabbed the wrist of his knife hand and savagely gave it a brief twist. The knife clattered to the floor. Harris promptly kicked it over in the corner beside El Lobo's gun.

Then, dragging the weakly struggling outlaw along with him, Harris retrieved his own gun and cartridge belt. The big rancher threw El Lobo to the floor and knelt with a knee on either side of his squirming captive's ribs while he refilled his empty gun, then buckled his belt on and dropped the gun into its holster.

Just as he finished there was a faint noise in the distance that sounded suspiciously like a sizeable group of horsemen riding hard and fast.

"Hurry up, Buck!" came a weak voice from outside, a voice that was music to Harris' ears. "Here comes thet reptile's whole blamed gang!"

Harris grinned in vast relief as he saw Chuck Lash trying to sit up there on the ground outside. The foreman still looked sick and shaken, but his strength seemed to be rapidly returning.

"Thet bullet must uh jest grazed a rib, I guess," Lash explained. "It jarred me plenty – thet was about all. But let's get goin' before thet pack uh coyotes gits here!"

"In jest a minute, Chuck," agreed Harris gently. "First I got somethin' I gotta do." He climbed up off El Lobo and jerked the outlaw to his feet.

"I'll give yuh jest one chance tuh be alive when yore gang gets here," he said tersely. "The redhead's gun is over there on the floor beside him. Go over and get it. My gun's in its holster. When yuh get the redhead's weapon put it in yore holster. Then we'll face each other and whichever of us is fastest on the draw will be the one thet lives the longest. Get goin'!"

El Lobo walked quickly over and, with his back to Harris, stooped for the redhead's gun.

"Look out, Buck!" yelled Lash suddenly from outside the

doorway, but Harris did not need the warning. His keenly alert eyes had already noted the telltale little jerk of El Lobo's right foot as the outlaw tensed his muscles for a quick, treacherous turn.

No wolf ever struck quicker than El Lobo's lightning turn and snap shot, but Harris was already throwing himself to one side in one swift convulsive movement, even as he snatched his own weapon from its holster.

El Lobo's shot missed by inches. A split second later Harris' gun was flaming death. El Lobo swayed drunkenly for a moment as the heavy bullets ripped into his body, then sprawled limp and lifeless to the floor.

Though the sound of galloping horses was perilously near, Harris made the impatient Lash stop long enough for a swift examination of his injured side. El Lobo's bullet had plowed a deep furrow along one of the foreman's ribs. Though the resulting flesh wound was more painful than serious, Harris decided that they had better head for the company doctor at one of the nearby mines for medical attention before trying the long ride back to the ranch.

The two men mounted and rode away. The oncoming riders of El Lobo's gang sounded nearly on their heels as they left the "Shack," but Harris had little fear of any effective pursuit, demoralized as the outlaw gang would be upon finding itself entirely leaderless.

They had ridden for over a mile in silence when Lash finally spoke.

"There's jest one thing puzzles me, Buck," he said. "Thanks tuh El Lobo's shot and the kickin' thet other skunk give me, I was layin' out there plumb knocked out for a spell. But I started comin' to in time tuh hear the last part uh what went on between yuh and El Lobo there inside. What I want tuh know is, when did thet six-shooter uh yours start tuh havin' a capacity for shootin' seven times?"

"It don't shoot seven times," admitted Harris with a grin. "Nor am I in the habit uh carryin' spare ammunition around in my vest pocket. It was El Lobo's own fault that I had thet

seventh shot. Do yuh remember thet fool black cartridge he left with his note on the bunkhouse table last week? I put in my pocket and plumb forgot about it till I laid on it in there tonight and danged near cracked a rib on it. I fished it out and found it was the same caliber as my gun. There wasn't enough black paint on it tuh hurt it any, so I had four perfectly good shells left instead uh three as El Lobo was figurin'.

"I put the black cartridge in my gun so's there'd be two empty chambers between the first three shells and it," Harris continued. "Then I shot the three, shootin' slow enough that El Lobo could count 'em all right. Then I started cussin' when my hammer clicked on the two empties, and El Lobo naturally thought I was plumb out uh ammunition like he'd been expectin'. He got jest careless enough then tuh give me the chance I was waitin' for, and I handed him a surprise with about the last thing he was expectin' — a seventh shot. He'd uh been still more surprised if he'd known thet seventh shot was the one he originally sent me as a present!"

SHEEPHERDER

by CLIFF WALTERS

The odd man called Bourbon had hinted once that his family back East was well-to-do; and now it transpired that he'd told the truth.

SHEEPMAN JIM OLIVER, tall, gaunt and a little stooped from the weight of adversities that had assumed a variety of shapes—badland drought, the blight of grasshoppers on alfalfa fields, and particularly that April blizzard disaster up on the Mesa—hadn't meant to open the letter addressed to his herder. It was just that Jim was too tired, a result of the after-supper trip to Paintrock, to notice that he had opened it along with his other mail. The letter was from Boston. After Jim had scanned that first paragraph, he couldn't stop reading; even if it had occurred to him. It went like this:

Dear Bob:

Two weeks ago I answered the only letter you have written since you left home. If I said some pretty caustic things, it was because you have ignored all the family codes of decency. Apparently you subscribe to a Boston paper, and knew when Mother and Dad were killed in that car accident, but you didn't so much as write until it occurred to you there would be quite a sum of money left.

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Then you wrote, hinted at a mysterious obligation to someone you didn't even bother name, and wondered if I wouldn't pass some of the money along to you. I won't waste time explaining my reaction to your request. You can judge that all too well by the tone of my other letter.

Since then I've cooled off. Am experiencing the remorse which comes to everyone who writes a letter while he's burning up with anger. Too, perhaps I'm remembering how differently Mother would have reacted to a letter from you. She didn't say much during all those years, Bob, but I could tell by the way she used to watch every sunset that at least part of her heart was somewhere out West. Too bad she didn't know just where, and was never to know.

She wouldn't have been very proud of what I said to you. I'm not either. That's why I'm writing this, Bob; and enclosing a check for two hundred—trainfare. Come home, lad. There is plenty of money for both of us, and I'll be glad to share it with you. Already my two young sons are looking forward to some

tales of the Wild West. Please wire me when you're starting. And make it soon

Larry

Della Oliver, Jim's wife, came out of the bedroom. Her hair was streaked with gray; and dark blue eyes, once attractive, had lost their luster. Della had gone to town with Jim; and now, with bony hands that showed all too plainly the evidence of washing dishes for lambing crews, of tending the garden below the three-roomed log house, of doing a hundred things that had long since become drudgery, she was unbuttoning the same old brown dress she always wore to town. She said:

"Why did you say, 'Well, I'll be damned,' Jim?"

"Did I?" He was putting the letter back in its envelope. He felt a little guilty and guessed he hadn't better tell Della about reading somebody else's mail. He said, "Looks like lambs are going to be a little better price this fall. I think I'll ship to Denver."

"Better come to bed, Jim." Della went back into the semi-darkness of the room where a coal oil lamp sputtered. Jim didn't follow right away. He sat there wondering what would happen when he delivered that letter to Bourbon, the shrunken, crooked-nosed little herder who was up at the summer camp, the high range near Dry Fork Canyon.

Although Bourbon had never talked much—he always seemed to be swathed in the mists of melancholy, and peculiarly detached, mentally as well as geographically, from the rest of the world—he had hinted once that his family was well-to-do. Now this strange little sheepherder who knew the hardships of winter range, the sweep of glacial, tight-thonged winds across vast salt sage flats down in the badlands, was offered by a contrite brother an opportunity to share inherited wealth. There was little doubt that he would accept.

It was hard for Jim Oliver to believe that, after all these years, Bourbon's sheepherding would come to an end. It was harder still to figure out a way to pay those long-accumulated back wages

Bourbon had coming. Perhaps he wouldn't demand a settlement, now that he was inheriting money. Very likely he wouldn't. Still, the next herder would demand fifty a month, cash. With things the way they were, Jim didn't know where he was going to get any cash; at least, until lamb-shipping time next fall.

"Come on to bed. Jim. You're dog-tired." Della's voice penetrated the log partition.

Jim got up then, blew out the lamp and walked slowly into the room where he and his wife had slept for thirty years. He decided not to fret about things any more tonight. He had been up to move camp for Bourbon day before yesterday, Wednesday. He wasn't due up there again until next Wednesday. In the meantime he could scout around for another herder; or maybe he could herd for a week or two himself. There wasn't much irrigating to do on the ranch right now. Maybe Dell could handle it. She had before.

Poor Dell. She was asleep already, lying there with her face turned away from the low burning lamp. God, Jim thought. Wouldn't she ever have anything but work. That same old brown dress hanging there on the wall. . . .

The next Wednesday Jim Oliver started up to his sheep camp. He rode old Cal, the black horse, and led a sorrel pony packed with grub.

It was a little before noon when he turned off the wagon road at Anthony Timber, and passed the sagging poles of a decaying corral where, years before, he and cowman Chris Brundage had had the bitter quarrel that forever estranged them.

The mountain breeze, spiced with the aromatic balm of pine, sage and wild-flowers, carried the faint tinkle of bells. Then Jim came in sight of the sheep, well scattered and grazing over near Dry Fork Canyon.

At this time of day Bourbon should be cooking dinner at the wagon over by the spring. Jim smiled a little hollowly. It was nice to be the bearer of good news, even if for personal reasons, he had been delinquent about it. No smoke was rising from the tarpaulined arch of a wagon that had long been Bourbon's home.

Maybe the little herder was napping in the shade of a boulder somewhere, as often he did.

Jim untied the pack ropes on the sorrel pony and lugged a pannierful of grub into the wagon. The sight of a rickety old typewriter on the side bench surprised him a little. There were some typewritten sheets of paper beside it. Curiously the sheepman glanced at the first page. He sat down then, and began to read:

Dear Jim: Because it is going to require quite a little writing to clear up some things, and because my pencil hand has been pretty badly crippled up ever since that time the wagon upset in McDermott Gulch, I have borrowed this old machine from the cabin down on Trapper Creek.

I don't know just how to start.

Maybe I had better begin with that day a good many years ago when yours truly, a young and not very prudent tenderfoot from Boston, stepped off the stage in Paintrock. I was feeling pretty bitter at the world, especially at my family—straightlaced Bostonians who had plenty of culture and money, but no excess compassion to waste on a younger son who had been expelled from college for taking part, a rather disgraceful part, in what my father called "a drinking and wenching spree."

Well, there was nobody in Paintrock to keep me from drinking. There wasn't much else to do except drink and brood. That is, until my money was gone. Then I just brooded and loafed around the saloon, and hated every cowpuncher that could toss a dollar on the bar and order a drink.

I wasn't only thirsty. I was hungry, too.

I was growing desperate. Every time I'd tackle some cowman for a job, somebody would yell: "Hey, fellers! Boston Bourbon still wants a job. Well, he can sure read brands, all right—on whisky bottles." Then they'd all laugh, and I'd leave the saloon and sneak over to Hyatt's livery stable. I'd climb up in the loft, lie down in the hay and be so miserable and homesick it was all I could do to keep from bawling.

One day big Chris Brundage, who owned the Diamond Bar

outfit up on Paint Creek, climbed up the ladder and found me lying there in the hay. Because he had nicknamed me Bourbon had been the roughest of any in his jibes, I grabbed a pitchfork and told him to get out of the loft. But he smiled, pulled a pint bottle out of his pocket and said:

"Drop that pitchfork and steady your nerves with a swig of this stuff, kid. A joke's a joke, but this thing has gone far enough."

I hesitated a little while, wondering if this was another joke of some kind. I decided—maybe because Brundage had good control of his steel gray eyes—that he was sincere. When he pulled the cork out of the bottle, and I got a whiff of liquor, I didn't hesitate any longer; but half emptied the pint in that first drink. On an empty stomach it kicked hard.

Later we sat there on the hay and finished the pint together. Brundage gave me some pointers about life in the West, and said he would give me a job up at his place as soon as one of his riders quit. Before he left he handed me two twenty-dollar bills, an advance of my first month's wages, and said:

"Now don't go and blow this money for liquor, kid. Spend ten or fifteen dollars of it for a second hand six-shooter and carry it all the time. You're not big enough to do much with your fists, but anybody can pull a trigger. The same fellows that have been kicking you around like a stray dog know that. Wear a gun and they'll have some respect for you. But don't use it unless you're forced to. Having the price of a gun don't give you the right to commit murder. Remember that, kid."

I felt more than grateful toward Chris Brundage that evening as I sat there in the hotel eating the first decent meal I'd had in days, and knowing I was going to sleep in a warm bed that night. It was only April and winter wasn't over yet in Wyoming.

It was dusk when I went out on the hotel porch after supper. Sitting there alone was a husky, middle-aged fellow. He looked pretty dejected, as if he felt about the way I had before Chris Brundage came along that afternoon. I went over and started talking to the stranger. He was a cowpuncher, he said, and had been out of a job quite a while. Would I stake him to a meal?

I did more than that. I paid him fifteen dollars for the pearl-handled gun he was wearing. I tried to get him to throw in the belt and holster, but he wouldn't do it. Said they were a gift from his father. From there I went down to Hyatt's barn to get my old suitcase and take it up to the hotel room. But while I was so near the saloon, and with money in my pocket, I couldn't help going over there to buy a pint of whisky.

That was a bad move.

Drinking alone at the bar was the same husky chap whose gun I had just bought. He turned and looked at me as I walked in. It stunned me a little when he said: "Where do you think you got that pearl-handled gun sticking out of your pocket, dude?"

Before I could catch my breath the bartender said, "So that accounts for your empty holster, eh, stranger? Huh! And Boston Bourbon's down to thieving!"

I couldn't get out a word.

"He'll be down on the floor next," the stranger said. He made a lunge at me then, and I tried to duck those big fists coming at me. I think I tried to pull the gun out of my pocket, but a blow caught me on the side of the head and nearly knocked me down. I tried to catch my balance, straighten up, but another swing cut my mouth pretty badly. Still another one landed on my nose, broke it and left it slanting off to one side—like it has been ever since.

I don't remember much after that. When I regained consciousness, I was aching all over from the beating I'd taken. Chris Brundage came in the saloon and helped me over to the hotel. He kept asking me what happened and I tried to tell him about buying the gun. I remember his face went a little hard as he said, "Now your gun's gone and so is the stranger. Well, some day husky Mr. Oliver is going to pull that old trick on the wrong tenderfoot."

I asked him what he meant and he answered, "Oliver, that sheepman out north of town. You must be the third or fourth one he's pulled that trick on. What did he do? Pretend to be a broke cowpuncher, sell you his forty-five, and keep the belt and holster so it would look like somebody stole his gun?"

I just nodded. My lips were so puffed I could hardly make myself understood when I talked.

"All for a few dollars booze money, and the joy of fighting," Brundage said. "Oliver likes to fight, if the competition's safe. But, as I said before, some day he's going to pull that stunt on the wrong tenderfoot."

"He has already," I said, and winced at what I saw in the cracked mirror of the hotel room—my own face.

All the jeers and abuse I had suffered at the hands of strangers, all the things I loathed, identified themselves with the man whose fists had given me that beating, Jim. I had never wanted to kill anyone before; had never thought of it. Now that was all I could think about.

I tried to sleep after Brundage left me, but I kept seeing the flinty blue eyes of the man who had beaten me; kept feeling his fists.

I think I must have inflicted a dozen deaths on him as I lay there. I shot him through and through, jabbed him with the pitchfork up in Hyatt's hay loft, and even burned him on a pyre of sagebrush. But I did all the suffering. When I couldn't stand it any longer I got up, dressed and went back to the saloon. There was nobody there except the bartender who was starting to lock up for the night. He looked at me and said: "Damned if you ain't a sight, Bourbon."

I told him to shut up or I'd cut his throat. He backed around behind the bar, finally sold me the gun he had reached for, and a couple of quarts of liquor. I put the two bottles in a gunny sack. The bartender said: "Leaving town, are you , Bourbon?"

"As surely as some riff-raff named Oliver is leaving the world," I told him, and went on outside.

A late moon was rising, and I could see plainly the road leading north from town. I slung the gunny sack over my shoulder and started walking that road. I was sore and stiff at first, especially when I climbed the slope up by Nelson's place. After a couple of drinks, the going seemed easier. In about an hour I was circling the base of Cedar Hill, and sat down on a ledge of sandrock to have another drink.

While I was resting, a coyote came trailing down a little hogback. When he saw me he stopped and stood there looking. I took a shot at him with my new gun. It sounded like the bullet hit quite a long ways from the mark, but I wasn't discouraged by my poor marksmanship. I'd be closer, a lot closer to sheepman Oliver when I shot at him. And he was a lot bigger coyote than the four-legged breed.

I had another drink and started up the Red Flats along Alkali Creek. The wind had risen and was pretty raw. My nose ached, but when it got too bad I'd take another drink. I kept looking for Oliver's sheep wagon, but it was nearly dawn before I sighted it on the Mesa, nearly sixteen miles from town. If I was a little drunk, on both liquor and hate, I was cautious as I approached that wagon.

I was nearly to it when a dog growled. I didn't pay much attention to him. With the gun in my hand I stood there waiting for the wagon door to open. The dog kept growling, a little louder all the time, and pretty soon the door opened. But the man standing there was a tall, thin fellow. Maybe he was too sleepy to notice the gun I'd put around behind me. He said: "This is a funny time to be tromping around in the hills, stranger. You look like a lost tenderfoot to me. Come on in. Damn that wind! It's starting to snow."

I edged up to the door, stepped up on the doubletrees and then inside. There was nobody there except the tall fellow. I'd never been in a sheep wagon before. The wind was rocking it pretty hard. I sat down on one of the side benches, looked around at the bunk, the little cupboards, the stove by the door. I said: "Is Oliver around?"

"No," the sheepherder said. "He's down at the ranch, about four miles from Paintrock. He's due out here tomorrow, to pull camp for me. If this storm gets bad he'll probably be out today. This ain't very good blizzard range. And a blizzard's what we're in for, sure as frying."

"I'll wait for Oliver," I said. "Would a drink take some of the chill off?"

"Drink? Show me!" he said, and I could tell by the way his eyes looked in the lantern light that he loved the stuff.

I fished out the new bottle, handed it to him and asked if I might lie down on his bunk for a while. He told me to help myself. I was too tired to hate Oliver like I had been. It was only a few seconds before I fell asleep, seconds when I could hear the snow pelting the tarpaulin, the creaking of bolsters, the low whining of the dog under the wagon and maybe the tinkle of sheep bells.

"They're leaving the bedground," the herder said. "I've got to get out there." But he didn't move. He was having another drink.

It must have been about noon when somebody climbed into the wagon. I sat up and saw a tall man standing there. But it wasn't the herder. It was you, Jim. Your face looked haggard, as gray as the tarpaulin roof of the wagon. Your blue eyes were as stormy as all outdoors. You scared me a little. I said: "Who are you?"

And you said, "I'm Oliver. A man that's found his band of sheep, the thousands of dollars he's worked for and slaved for, piled off the west rim of the mesa. They wouldn't have storm-drifted to their death if my herder had been on the job. But he was drunk.

"I found him sitting in the snow, asleep, with his back against a boulder. I near killed him with my bare hands before he got away and headed for town. But I guess he's no more to blame than you. The buzzard that brought liquor to camp."

You stepped toward the bunk then, Jim. I started to say, "You can't be Oliver," but you caught my throat in your big calloused hands, Jim, and you choked me until the sheep wagon was a black, reeling cave. Then you heaved me outside. I hit on the wagon tongue and rolled off into the snow. I crawled on my hands and knees for a way, until the wagon was only a blur back there in the storm. I thought the wind would freeze me before I could get up and walk to a patch of cedars in a little swale.

There was a little bunch of sheep huddled in the protection of those cedars, probably a hundred head. Their wool was matted

with snow and their eyes looked like amber glass. One old ewe had a bell on, but it was so clogged with snow it didn't make any sound. Although a tenderfoot, I realized that coyotes or wolves would get those sheep if they weren't cared for. I went back to the wagon, Jim, and told you about them.

You said, "A hundred head left out of two thousand." Your voice was flat and toneless, as if the wind—and misfortune, maybe—had numbed your heart. Then you got on your horse and rode off into the storm. But you weren't heading toward the swale. You were going back to the valley where your ranch was.

I crawled into the wagon and built a fire, and kept wondering why you weren't the husky man who had beaten me so last night. I wondered if Chris Brundage had made a mistake. Then I remembered hearing some talk in the saloon about range trouble that Brundage was having with a sheepman named Oliver, whose range adjoined his. That gave me a jolt, Jim.

Later that afternoon when the storm cleared, I saw two men riding toward the wagon. They were Chris Brundage and the heavy-set man who had beaten me last night. I walked to the door of the wagon and stood there waiting. The six-shooter was in my right hand, but I leaned against the door frame in such a way that the gun was out of sight.

"Hello, Bourbon," Brundage called. "Oliver left here a while ago, didn't he?"

"I thought you said this grinning ape was Oliver." I pointed to the husky man.

"A little case of mistaken identity," Brundage said, and smiled.

"Maybe a little trick," I said. "Strange, wasn't it, how this pal of yours happened to be right on hand to sell me a gun last night?"

"It worked, didn't it?" asked the heavy-set man. "And when you left town last night you hinted to the bartender that you were going after Oliver, didn't you? And you bought his gun."

"So gossip has it," Brundage said. His eyes made me think of crusted snow. "To bad about Oliver's hard luck with the sheep. I

hate that. I guess this about puts him out of the sheep business. A little storm, a little strategy." He laughed. "All we have to do now, Ed, is put this tenderfoot out of his misery, then catch up with Oliver and make things look as if they'd had a gun fight, and that Oliver, wounded, had tried to make it home."

"How about your forty dollars, Brundage?" I asked him. "I hate to see you lose anything on this deal you've engineered."

He nodded at the fellow he called Ed. The husky man reached for his gun as deliberately as if he were going to shoot a steer. I moved faster—and shot him through the chest. He couldn't have been more than eight feet away. Maybe Brundage would have killed me then, but the other man's horse reared and jolted into the cowman's mount. Before Brundage could regain his balance in the saddle, bring up the gun he had half drawn, I pulled the trigger again; kept pulling it until my gun was empty.

I felt petrified for a minute or two after that. It was hard to believe I'd killed two men. Not that I felt any particular compunction, Jim. I never have, about that. I was just stunned and didn't know what to do for a while. Finally I caught the two horses, unsaddled them and turned them loose on the range. The saddles I buried with Brundage and Ed Davis in the rocky crevice not far from where the sheep had piled over the rim. I dragged the whole works down there, and it left quite a mark in the snow. But it had all melted away before the next morning.

By the time you got there the next afternoon, and found me trying to take care of what few sheep were left, Jim, there wasn't any evidence of red stain near the wagon. I'd milled the sheep around so much their tracks covered everything.

I guess it wasn't so strange that nobody ever rode the Mesa looking for Brundage and Davis. They had said they were going up in the Medicine Lodge country when they left the Diamond Bar ranch that day. Their horses didn't get home, either. Later I found where wolves had killed them over in the red hills.

So much for the mystery, Jim. And the mystery of why I stayed at your camp and tried to salvage what little was left of the wreck. I felt—I still feel—responsible for the thousands of

dollars you lost in that storm. Well, in time you got used to having me around. You sensed that I was genuinely sorry for what had happened, and that I was trying, if feebly, to make amends. When you mortgaged your ranch and bought more sheep, you let me herd them for you.

So I stayed on.

It seems like an eternity, Jim. Especially those long winters down in the salt sage country. I've always felt guilty about drawing any wages at all, with finances crowding you so hard. But I had to have a few clothes, tobacco—and the Boston paper. Sometimes it looked as if you were going to get in the clear again, back to where you were before that April blizzard. But wool and lamb prices have too many ups and downs, mostly downs, a hard storm to weather when you have so much interest to pay.

I suppose that, ordinarily, a man can get used to most any kind of life, Jim. I can't. This eternal solitude has a way of churning up old memories, a variety particularly goading to a damned fool who fled from the smoke of one little mistake into a fire that singed his wings right.

Two months ago the Boston paper published an account of my parents' death, Jim. An automobile accident. They left quite an estate which went to my brother, Lawrence. On your account, Jim, I wrote my brother not long ago, told him where I was; and that I could use some money if he could find it in his heart to share some of his wealth with this unworthy renegade.

A couple of weeks ago I heard from him. He jumped on me rough-shod, Jim, and I don't blame him. He is more than ashamed of the blood tie which exists between us, and dares me to try getting one penny of the Churchill money. That letter was the crowning blow. I always thought—dreamed is a better word, maybe—of going back to see Larry some day.

I'm going somewhere else, Jim. I'll be there by the time you read this. I'm going down to the Point and step off into Dry Fork Canyon. Those big rocky walls have looked like jaws to me for a long time now, jaws waiting to swallow a miserable morsel who is

as obnoxious to what remains of his family, and to the world in general, as he is to himself.

It is past dawn now, and I know you'll be along to pull camp in a few hours, so the sheep won't suffer any before you get here. Scotty will keep an eye on them. So long, Jim Oliver. Sorry I couldn't have paid off a debt with cash, and put you on your feet again. May your next herder be a better specimen than

Your crooked-nosed friend,
Bourbon.

P.S. I'm leaving a couple of five-dollar bills and my watch in the cupboard. Keep the old ticker, Jim. And maybe the ten dollars will buy a new dress for Dell. Her old brown one has seen its best days—

Those last two paragraphs weren't easy for Jim to read. A silver-blue mist was in his eyes, blurring his world. He nearly fell as he left the wagon and mounted his black horse. He rode a fast, hopeless mile before horseshoes clinked on the stony surface of the point jutting out like the lofty and abrupt stub of a broken pier from the north rim of the canyon. He called out one word, "Bourbon!" and it echoed strangely like a sob on the acoustics of granite walls.

Scotty, the shaggy intelligent sheep dog that had been Bourbon's companion for six years, was lying, head resting on extended paws, beside a shapeless old hat there on the sun warmed stone; and the breeze was gently tufting his hair. He didn't get up and wag his tail as he usually did when the boss came to camp. Eyes seeing nothing, Scotty hugged his stone couch, kept vigil over his deep and sunless canyon where brawled, two hundred feet below, a roaring, boulder scarred stream that swirled to mysterious oblivion under a ledge.

Getting off his horse Jim knelt beside Scotty, laid a calloused hand on the dog's neck and wished he had brought that letter up to camp yesterday.

Everything would have been all right then—for him and Dell and Bourbon. Remorse was suddenly a lash scourging Jim Oliver, forcing him to rise and step toward the brink from which another

man had leaped. He thought of Dell, and stopped. He turned, looked across the range and saw that a little bunch of sheep were straying over a ridge.

"Go around 'em, Scotty," he said, and waved his arm.

The dog had always obeyed commands.

He did now, although there was a moment of indecision when an invisible leash of loyalty held him to this spot where he had last seen the mild, soft spoken little man who had been his master. Eventually, however, Scotty trotted away through the sage. Jim Oliver mounted his horse and slowly followed.

In his hand he carried rather reverently an old hat, the limp brim of which would never again flap in the pine-scented breezes of the high country, or under the assault of winds blustering across the bleak emptiness of winter range.

DIRGE OF AN INDIAN MOTHER

by HENRY HERBERT KNIBBS

They have carried him down to the hollow land,
To the hollow land below;
They have laid him down in the hollow land,
With his quiver and lance and bow;
Their feet are red with the bitter dust,
Their eyes are dim with woe.

They have kindled flame in the hollow land;
The withering branches groan;
They have slain his horse in the hollow land,
They have broken the bowl of stone.
His spirit rides on the drifting smoke,
In the hollow land and lone.

I shall go down to the hollow land,
When the East wind brings the dawn;
I shall go down to the hollow land,
Where my warrior son has gone,
When the panther drinks at the morning pool,
And the lean doe calls the fawn.

Putting Her Eye Out

by JOHN BEAMES

A boatload of well-heeled prospectors on their way back to civilization was sheer delight for river pirates. Unfortunately, they did not notice a little runt named Chick Binney, and did not think that the man who makes a fortune by hard, honest work in the wilds must have noticeable qualities.

NOBODY TOOK MUCH NOTICE of Chick Binney. He was not a noticeable man. He was very small and very silent, and he attended strictly to his own affairs. But he was leaving the North with over twenty thousand dollars, and money is not gathered by weaklings along the forlorn banks of the broad Nyuko.

The *North Star* was making her last trip to the outside for the season, carrying about forty successful prospectors like Chick, some store and saloon-keepers and a few women. Everybody was happy at the thought of going home and escaping seven months of snow and darkness and intense cold.

"Well, this'd be some gang to hold up," said Benton Bawford, who had made a fortune selling mouldy flour to hungry prospectors. "They tell me there's two hundred thousand dollars in dust in the captain's safe, and this crowd's pretty well heeled individually. What'd you do if there was a stick-up, Cody?"

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Walrus Cody flicked his huge black mustache upward with the back of his hand and squared his broad shoulders.

"I'm willin' to leave 'em try," he bragged. "I eat stick-ups. Lemme tell you about the time up the Wanamakquot."

Bawford winked slyly to two or three, and presently a small crowd was listening to Walrus stretching a powerful imagination in a tale of heroic adventure.

Chick Binney sat in his corner of the saloon, a cheerful and appreciative grin on his lean little face, and listened to the talk and laughter about him.

But he noticed idly that there were several passengers who seemed following some activity of their own. There were eight or nine of them who formed in perpetually changing little groups, that broke up and circulated among the passengers, and reformed again. He came to the conclusion that they were a gang of gamblers picking out likely victims and arranging a plan of campaign, and decided mentally that he would play no poker on this trip with anyone.

He never thought of a hold-up. No steamboat on the Nyuko had ever been held up, and it did not seem a very feasible undertaking.

All that day the stern-wheeler kicked her way down the turbid river, a mile wide in places, between grassy flats, now brown and dry, with low purple mountains lifting through a faint haze on either hand. A feeble sun cast a soft golden light over the scene and twinkled on the pancake ice the *North Star* shouldered aside with a subdued crunching noise.

Here and there they passed some tiny knots of buildings, many of them abandoned, but in general no sign of human life or activity interrupted the wide desolation of the landscape.

Darkness came early, but under the beam of her big headlight the little stern-wheeler puffed busily on her way. Though the big river was low and full of sand bars, with her light draft and a good pilot at the wheel there was little danger.

Supper was served in the saloon, and Chick took his place with the rest. Near the close of the meal, five of the men whose activities he had noted, rose from their places at the end of the

table nearest the bow. Two of them turned and went rapidly up the companionway towards the upper deck and the pilot house. The other three bunched.

At the same moment, four more men got up at the opposite end of the saloon, two of whom turned in the direction of the engine room.

Suddenly each man flashed a large and sinister gun. "Up. Put 'em up," snapped a tall man with a narrow face and long yellow teeth.

A woman screamed and there was a moment of paralyzed dismay among the diners.

"Up, damn you. Reach for it."

They blundered to their feet with their hands in the air.

The tall man displayed still more of his yellow fangs in a jeering grim. "That's right, that's right. Gentlemen line up on the left. Keep them hands up. All the men left, gentlemen. Sashay there."

A disturbance broke out aft. Shouts, then a shot and more shouting.

The tall man directed, "Go back there, Frank, an' see what's doin'. Keep still, everybody else. You woman, there, quit your squallin', or I'll crack you over the head. Nobody's goin' to hurt you."

The frightened proprietress of a restaurant was silent.

"One of the roustabouts made a kick an' Deck shot him," came a voice. "There's no trouble now."

"You hear that, gentlemen," said the tall man warningly. "Them as ain't biddable is odd man out an' the river gets him. See? Now, keep them hands high – better be tired than dead. Frisk 'em, boys. One at a time an' make a good job of it. Don't miss any money belts."

One by one the male passengers were thoroughly searched. Their weapons were piled upon the saloon table, and their valuables went into a bag carried by one of the robbers. A man ran a careless hand over Chick Binney, as a not very dangerous person, took his money and his gun, but not his knife.

"Now the ladies," said the tall man.

"I'll see you in blazes first," snapped Diamond Lizzie, a lady noted for courage if not for propriety. "I know you, you're Call-off Pete, that's who you are. You'll land up one of these here days with a rope necktie."

Call-off gave her a wide and sweeping bow. "It sure gives me a pain in the neck to be ha'sh with you, Miss Mizzie, or is it Lizzie, but you'll have to cough up some of them big diamonds of yours or take a swim in the river. I don't allow no deadheads on no steamboat of mine."

The pilot came down the companionway, a gun muzzle in the small of his back.

"Line him up with the rest, Chew," directed Call-off, "an' go an' grab the rings off of fat Lizzie."

But Diamond Lizzie had the claws of a tigress, and Chew gave back hastily, the blood trickling down his cheeks.

Call-off took a long stride forward and struck the woman a brutal blow over the head with the barrel of his gun that stretched her on the deck. An indignant growl came from the passengers and a few dropped their hands.

"Up, up. Reach for it. No back talk there," roared Call-off, showing all his yellow fangs. "I'd just as lief shoot a man as look at him. Chew, you take this woman's rings off, an' dump her on a settee. Luckney, give him a hand. The rest of you women hand over what you got an' do it quick, or you'll get the same medicine."

"Search the staterooms," directed Call-off. "Bring all the grips in here to the saloon, an' see there's no guns layin' around loose. Then take this gang back an' lock 'em up, four or five together. Separate 'em out so they ain't in staterooms next each other."

"An' you," to the passengers, "you bee-have yourselves. No funny work, or in the river you go an' swim for it. Sashay now, sashay."

Chick found himself in a stateroom far aft, together with Walrus Cody, Benton Bawford and another man. They took no notice of him, for he was not a noticeable man.

"Well, you got your hold-up," grumbled Bawford. "Wonder

what they figure to do with us? Why didn't you start some of your tall stuff, Cody?"

"There was women there," said Walrus solemnly.

Bawford gave a disgusted grunt and the other man a dreary chuckle.

Chick sat silent in his corner and thought. He was angry to the marrow of his bones. To be robbed of all he had suffered so much to acquire filled him with a molten heat of wrath. He looked around him. The door was flimsy. Walrus, Benton, and the other man were big and powerful, and he was prepared to aid them to the best of his ability. A determined effort might enable them to burst out and free some of the other passengers.

"We might have a chance at that," he said aloud.

The others jumped and looked at him in a startled way. So deep, resonant and powerful a voice issuing from so small a body usually had that effect on people hearing Chick speak for the first time.

"Less noise in there," shouted one of the bandits stationed in the corridor.

"Well, for God's sake," gasped Benton. "Where'd you raise that voice? What are you talkin' about anyway?"

It was always difficult for Chick to modulate his voice, but he succeeded in throttling it down to a hoarse rumble.

Benton shook his head decisively. "I'm not committin' suicide this trip, even if they have got ten thousand of my money. Maybe Cody'd like to be in on it."

"I'd do it only there's women aboard," said Walrus plaintively.

"I wouldn't do it no way, women or no women," said the third man.

"Begad, an' I'll tackle it alone then," said Chick scornfully. "Let me out the window.

Benton just shrugged his shoulders. "Well, if you have your mind made up to get killed, I won't stop you. But do you think, small as you are, that you can wiggle through that little hole?"

" 'Tain't often I'm glad to be small," said Chick, "but this seems like one of the times. Give me a leg up."

He opened the port cautiously and stuck his head out. Nothing

stirred on the covered way between the deckhouse and the rail. He gave a quick wriggle, slipped through the port like an eel, and hung head downward for a breathless moment. He turned in midair like a cat, got one hand on the edge of the port, freed his legs, and dropped.

A man cleared his throat loudly and spat somewhere in the shadows of the stern.

Chick hurried forward, but the door of the engine room opened and threw a shaft of light athwart his path. A man turned in the doorway and spoke to someone within.

Between two fires, Chick darted to the rail, shinnied up a stanchion and gained the hurricane deck, just as the slam of a door and a heavy step under him showed what danger he had escaped. The bandits were evidently patrolling the whole vessel systematically.

He was safe, but only for the moment. The whole bare sweep of the deck lay open under a sky full of bright stars. The nearest cover was the shadow of the funnel, but even when there he realized that he had not advanced his cause in the least. He was free, but he was unarmed, and if seen he would be shot down without mercy.

The light from the pilot house attracted him. If he could in any way gain control of the *North Star* at that point, doubtless something might be done. He slid from the stack to the shadow of the covered companionhead. The pilot house was only ten feet away.

He was about to make the dash when he heard brisk steps ascending the ladder. He shrank back and a man passed within eighteen inches of him and went into the pilot house. The escape was so narrow that it was a minute before his pounding heart slowed down to normal.

Then he pattered lightly across the deck and lifted his head until he could peer in at the rear window of the pilot house. A man stood at the wheel and beside him Call-off was pointing down the river and saying something.

Chick crept over and applied his ear to the crack in the door,

which Call-off had left ajar. The voice of the pilot was barely aduible, but Call-off's strident tones were clear.

"Oh, they're all right. Not a peep out of any of 'em. I tamed old Diamond Liz." He laughed callously. "She's layin' on a saloon settee with a crack on the head. Keep her mouth shut. When the rest seen we meant business they kept pretty quiet."

The pilot said something.

"Frank an' Heinie's in the engine room," replied Call-off. "Deck had to shoot a roustabout, an him an' Dahl's guardin' the passengers. Chew an' Luckney an' Jigger's workin' on the captain's safe. Maybe this whole business didn't work out sweet, eh? Lady in the corner an' seven hands round."

The pilot spun the wheel to avoid a sand bar, and made some half-audible remark about the passengers.

"No, no, nothin' doin'," dissented Call-off. "You pile her up on Klootch Point an' we'll let 'em go ashore. Then we'll set fire to her."

"Pretty tough, that," commented the pilot.

"Tough nothin'. It'll be tough on us if they catch us. If you just leave her aground, they'd have her floated off in a half a day, an' be right after us. No sir, we'll need all the start we can get. We'll let 'em take blankets an' grub with 'em, and' they won't hurt for two-three days. Somebody's bound to come along an' find 'em. No sir, that's their funeral. You run her aground on Klootch Point. Louie'll be waitin' with the boat, an' we'll first couple off to the right. Join your hands an' away to the west. Well, I guess."

Chick had heard enough, and his position was one of extreme peril. One of the bandits might come along at any moment and catch him. He crept around to the side of the pilot house to meditate.

So the *North Star* was to be cast away and burnt, and the wretched passengers abandoned to starvation and exposure. Winter was coming down fast and the temperature might drop below zero at any time. There would be no more boats plying on the Nyuko that season, there was no shelter and no fuel. Anyone who survived the experience would be lucky. Rescue could

hardly arrive in time to save most of them from being frozen to death. And yet he could form no plan of action.

As he crouched there, his eye naturally followed the broadening band of radiance that streamed out from the *North Star's* headlight. By its aid and by its aid alone was she able to walk the waters in darkness and escape the humped sand bars lifting, like marine monsters, out of the swirling current. It was her eye, and without it she would be helpless.

"Begad," muttered Chick, "I'll put her eye out for her, derned if I don't. It'll make trouble anyway, an' a fellow might have a chance to do something while they're tryin' to fix her."

He crept under the forward rail, clinging to the narrow ledge upon which the headlight was mounted. The pilot could not see him where he was unless by opening the pilot house window and looking down. He fumbled for a switch, but the light was turned on or off in the pilot house, and all he could find was the wire.

He felt in his pocket for the big claspknife the searchers had carelessly left him. He opened it, braced himself and slashed. There was a sharp snap, a crackling blue spark, and a tingling shock rushed up his arm.

The eye of the *North Star* winked out, and she plunged blindly on down the treacherous Nyuko.

Chick heard Call-off's explosive, "What the hell?" But he was already dangling in midair by one hand. He let go his hold and dropped, landing lightly on his feet in front of the saloon.

The place was brightly lit and had no visible occupants. He was about to enter and make a dash for the weapons on the table, when a man came hastily in at the other end. He ducked down.

Bells clanged, and he could hear Call-off's strident voice shouting orders. The beat of the steamboat's engines slowed almost to a stop. With barely steerage way on her, the *North Star* nosed along through the dark.

There were four men in the saloon now, a hasty glimpse showed, and one of them was approaching the door. Chick slid round the corner. It occurred to him that he might get into the saloon by another door, or possibly stir up trouble in the engine room.

But the engine room door was closed and resisted his cautious efforts to open it. He went on past the row of stateroom ports towards the stern, keeping close to the wall. He still held the open knife in his hand, not because it was likely to be of much use, but for the moral support of feeling he was armed.

As he neared the after end of the deck house a man swung round the corner so suddenly that they almost collided. The bandit reached for his gun, and Chick, with the desperate courage of a weasel at bay, leaped upon him with his knife and struck.

The man staggered, his half-drawn gun sliding back into its sheath. Chick clapped a hand over his mouth and went down with him. He was up himself in a flash, with peering eyes and straining ears. The robber lay very still with the knife buried in him.

With a hoarse roar the overcharged boilers of the *North Star* began to blow off steam. Chick leaped two feet into the air.

Recovering himself, he dropped upon his knees, with trembling fingers he unbuckled the dead man's cartridge belt and passed it around his own narrow waist.

The thing was hardly done when his sensitized eyes noted something moving down the dim forward vista of the covered deck. He slipped under the rail, lying flat on the narrow coaming a few inches above the water. As he lay there, he eased the gun out of its holster and held it ready to fire at the first challenge.

The newcomer came on in a leisurely way. "Hey, Deck," he shouted above the roar of the escaping steam. "Deck, where are you?"

Chick found himself sweating, even in the cold wind that blew across the water. His left leg was cramped and his position highly uncomfortable. The man paused to spit over the rail, and continued his stroll. "Hey, Deck," he repeated.

He was within ten feet of Chick when he halted with a startled ejaculation. He took a few quick steps forward and fell on his knees beside the corpse, his back to Chick.

The little man saw his golden opportunity and took it. He raised the heavy revolver for a swing, and jerked himself upright.

The safety valve choked and the roar trailed off into a whisper.

The man suddenly turned his head, started to fling up his arm, and received the full stroke of the heavy barrel on the left temple.

"That's two of 'em," exulted Chick, hopping over the rail.

"Hey," said a voice aft.

With a gasp, Chick clutched a stanchion and began to scramble up it.

"Who's that?" cried the voice in sharp suspicion, and feet pattered on the deck.

As he swung himself over the upper rail, a gun cracked and a bullet nicked his boot heel. He dived for the shadow of the funnel.

"There's a man loose," bawled an agitated voice from the lower deck. "He got Deck an' Heinie. He's. . . . "

The voice of the safety valve soared into the crescendo again and drowned the rest.

Chick huddled against the funnel, panting. He could only hear dimly with the escaping steam whirling through the pipe beside him, but there was evident excitement among the pirates on the *North Star.*

The second noisy outburst ended in choking clucks and gurgles, and he heard Call-off's voice, "Is he up above or down below? Where in hell did you see him?"

"He's up there some place," returned the voice.

"Scatter an' look for him," directed Call-off. "Don't let him get away. Shoot him on sight."

Chick heard his steps coming aft from the pilot house, and the steps of another man.

If he stayed where he was he would be caught between two fires. He gave a gulp, and stepped boldly out in Call-off's path.

Both weapons spoke at once, and the far shores of the river reverberated the sound.

Call-off reeled back across the deck, struck the low rail, and pitched headlong overboard. Chick swung round as the other man stepped past the funnel, and another duel flamed out.

Chick felt a scorching pain in his left forearm and his gun clattered to the deck, but his adversary dropped forward on his

hands and knees, coughed, and laid himself gently down on his face.

Stooping with a swimming head, Chick slowly gathered up his revolver, and stood up, swaying upon his feet.

He lifted his thunderous bass. "After 'em, boys. Don't let 'em get away on you. We're holdin' the deck up here. Go to it. We got 'em, we got 'em."

The *North Star,* out of control, took the ground with a hard bump that flung him off his feet.

As he scrambled shakily up, there burst out in the saloon below him the crackle of shots and a shrill and vengeful feminine voice.

"What's that?" mumbled Chick, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs out of it. "Something doin' anyway."

Sitting on the deck and hugging his wounded arm, he flung his foghorn voice to the stars. "Give 'em hell. We got 'em goin'. We're holding' the deck. Give 'em hell."

The indomitable Diamond Lizzie, dumped carelessly upon the saloon settee and disregarded, had early regained her senses, but bided her time with discreetly closed eyes. The diversion caused by Chick gave her her opportunity.

The solitary robber on guard in the saloon, already daunted by the shooting and the roaring of the bull-voiced champion overhead, saw her spring up and snatch a gun. A bullet nicked his ear as he fled down the corridor past the engine room, Diamond Lizzie pursuing with bullets and imprecations.

While the passengers, either freed by her or having smashed down the flimsy doors, were re-arming themselves vengefully in the saloon, and Chick continued his warlike chant on the hurricane deck, the surviving pirates made an attempt to get the skiff on the after deck over the side.

A short but fierce engagement followed. Two of the pirates were killed and a third wounded, a passenger killed and three wounded. But in the end all was quiet; not one robber had left the vessel alive; and the *North Star* sat firmly on a sand bar in midriver.

Chick, feeling very faint, had fallen silent. He heard voices, "Where is he? Where is he?"

"Here I am," he replied. "I got a sore arm. Somebody give me a hand up."

"Hurrah. We got him He's all right," they shouted down the companion way. "We're bringing him down."

The passengers hastily assembled in the saloon to greet their deliverer. Diamond Lizzie held the center of the floor, fire in her glance, and a revolver still in her hand.

Chick was half-carried down the companionway, his lean little face a sickly white, a dank lock of sandy hair hanging over one eye, and the blood dripping from his wounded arm down his legs.

Diamond Lizzie stared at him incredulously. "Is this him?" she inquired. "An' him with that voice? Why, my gosh, he ain't no bigger'n a poker chip. Why, I thought all along it was Walrus Cody. Where's Walrus?"

"Right here, Liz," answered Walrus in a subdued voice from a far corner

"Oh, you're there, are you? That's a fine place to be. Why wasn't you in on this?"

Walrus coughed. "Well, you see," he murmured. "You see." He coughed again. "You see there was women on board. An' so . . . . ." He flung back his shoulders with a sudden access of confidence. "So I let the little feller have a chance."

"Like the devil," said Diamond Lizzie.

The Bride Comes To Yellow Sky

by STEPHEN CRANE

Stephen Crane (1871-1900) is best known for his realistic Civil War novel, *The Red Badge of Courage,* but he also wrote stories placed in a variety of locales. Two of the best of these are set in the West, and this, the shorter, one is regarded as among the finest of American short stories.

The great Pullman was whirling onward with such dignity of motion that a glance from the window seemed simply to prove that the plains of Texas were pouring eastward. Vast flats of green grass, dull-hued spaces of mesquite and cactus, little groups of frame houses, woods of light and tender trees, all were sweeping into the east, sweeping over the horizon, a precipice.

A newly married pair had boarded this coach at San Antonio. The man's face was reddened from many days in the wind and sun, and a direct result of his new black clothes was that his brick-colored hands were constantly performing in a most conscious fashion. From time to time he looked down respectfully at his attire. He sat with a hand on each knee, like a man waiting in a barber's shop. The glances he devoted to other passengers were furtive and shy.

The bride was not pretty, nor was she very young. She wore a dress of blue cashmere, with small reservations of velvet here and there, and with steel buttons abounding. She continually

twisted her head to regard her puff sleeves, very stiff, straight, and high. They embarrassed her. It was quite apparent that she had cooked, and that she expected to cook, dutifully. The blushes caused by the careless scrutiny of some passengers as she had entered the car were strange to see upon this plain, underclass countenance, which was drawn in placid, almost emotionless lines.

They were evidently very happy. "Ever been in a parlor car before?" he asked, smiling with delight.

"No," she answered, "I never was. It's fine, ain't it?"

"Great! And then after a while we'll go forward to the diner, and get a big layout. Finest meal in the world. Charge a dollar." "Oh, do they?" cried the bride. "Charge a dollar? Why, that's too much—for us—ain't it, Jack?"

"Not this trip, anyhow," he answered bravely. "We're going to go the whole thing."

Later he explained to her about the trains. "You see, it's a thousand miles from one end of Texas to the other; and this train runs right across it, and never stops but four times." He had the pride of an owner. He pointed out to her the dazzling fittings of the coach; and in truth her eyes opened wider as she contemplated the sea-green figured velvet, the shining brass, silver, and glass, the wood that gleamed as darkly brilliant as the surface of a pool of oil. At one end, a bronze figure sturdily held a support for a separated chamber, and at convenient places on the ceiling were frescos in olive and silver.

To the minds of the pair, their surroundings reflected the glory of their marriage that morning in San Antonio; this was the environment of their new estate; and the man's face in particular beamed with an elation that made him appear ridiculous to the Negro porter. This individual at times surveyed them from afar with an amused and superior grin. On other occasions, he bullied them with skill in ways that did not make it exactly plain to them that they were being bullied. He subtly used all the manners of the most unconquerable kind of snobbery. He oppressed them; but of this oppression they had small knowledge, and they speedily forgot that infrequently a number

of travelers covered them with stares of derisive enjoyment. Historically there was supposed to be something infinitely humorous in their situation.

"We are due in Yellow Sky at three forty-two," he said, looking tenderly into her eyes.

"Oh, are we?" she said, as if she had not been aware of it. To evince surprise at her husband's statement was part of her wifely amiability. She took from a pocket a little silver watch; and as she held it before her, and stared at it with a frown of attention, the new husband's face shone.

"I bought it in San Anton' from a friend of mine," he told her gleefully.

"It's seventeen minutes past twelve," she said, looking up at him with a kind of shy and clumsy coquetry. A passenger, noting this play, grew excessively sardonic, and winked at himself in one of the numerous mirrors.

At last they went to the dining car. Two rows of Negro waiters, in glowing white suits, surveyed their entrance with the interest, and also the equanimity, of men who had been forewarned. The pair fell to the lot of a waiter who happened to feel pleasure in steering them through their meal. He viewed them with the manner of a fatherly pilot, his countenance radiant with benevolence. The patronage, entwined with the ordinary deference, was not plain to them. And yet, as they returned to their coach, they showed in their faces a sense of escape.

To the left, miles down a long, purple slope, was a little ribbon of mist where moved the keening Rio Grande. The train was approaching it at an angle, and the apex was Yellow Sky. Presently it was apparent that, as the distance from Yellow Sky grew shorter, the husband became commensurately restless. His brick-red hands were more insistent in their prominence. Occasionally he was even rather absent-minded and faraway when the bride leaned forward and addressed him.

As a matter of truth, Jack Potter was beginning to find the shadow of a deed weigh upon him like a leaden slab. He, the

town marshal of Yellow Sky, a man known, liked, and feared in his corner, a prominent person, had gone to San Antonio to meet a girl he believed he loved, and there, after the usual prayers, had actually induced her to marry him, without consulting Yellow Sky for any part of the transaction. He was now bringing his bride before an innocent and unsuspecting community.

Of course, people in Yellow Sky married as it pleased them, in accordance with a general custom; but such was Potter's thought of his duty to his friends, or of their idea of his duty, or of an unspoken form which does not control men in these matters, that he felt he was heinous. He had committed an extraordinary crime. Face to face with this girl in San Antonio, and spurred by his sharp impulse, he had gone headlong over all the social hedges. At San Antonio he was like a man hidden in the dark. A knife to sever any friendly duty, any form, was easy to his hand in that remote city. But the hour of Yellow Sky—the hour of daylight—was approaching.

He knew full well that his marriage was an important thing to his town. It could only be exceeded by the burning of the new hotel. His friends could not forgive him. Frequently he had reflected on the advisability of telling them by telegraph, but a new cowardice had been upon him. He feared to do it. And now the train was hurrying him toward a scene of amazement, glee, and reproach. He glanced out of the window at the line of haze swinging slowly in toward the train.

Yellow Sky had a kind of brass band, which played painfully, to the delight of the populace. He laughed without heart as he thought of it. If the citizens could dream of his prospective arrival with his bride, they would parade the band at the station and escort them, amid cheers and laughing congratulations, to his adobe home.

He resolved that he would use all the devices of speed and plainscraft in making the journey from the station to his house. Once within that safe citadel, he could issue some sort of vocal bulletin, and then not go among the citizens until they had time to wear off a little of their enthusiasm.

The bride looked anxiously at him. "What's worrying you, Jack?"

He laughed again. "I'm not worrying, girl; I'm only thinking of Yellow Sky."

She flushed in comprehension.

A sense of mutual guilt invaded their minds and developed a finer tenderness. They looked at each other with eyes softly aglow. But Potter often laughed the same nervous laugh; the flush upon the bride's face seemed quite permanent.

The traitor to the feelings of Yellow Sky narrowly watched the speeding landscape. "We're nearly there," he said.

Presently the porter came and announced the proximity of Potter's home. He held a brush in his hand, and with all his airy superiority gone, he brushed Potter's new clothes as the latter slowly turned this way and that way. Potter fumbled out a coin and gave it to the porter, as he had seen others do. It was a heavy and muscle-bound business, as that of a man shoeing his first horse.

The porter took their bag, and as the train began to slow, they moved forward to the hooded platform of the car. Presently the two engines and their long string of coaches rushed into the station of Yellow Sky.

"They have to take water here," said Potter, from a constricted throat and in mournful cadence, as one announcing death. Before the train stopped, his eye had swept the length of the platform, and he was glad and astonished to see there was none upon it but the station agent, who, with a slightly hurried and anxious air, was walking toward the water tanks. When the train had halted, the porter alighted first, and placed in position a little temporary step.

"Come on, girl," said Potter hoarsely. As he helped her down, they each laughed on a false note. He took the bag from the Negro, and bade his wife cling to his arm. As they slunk rapidly away, his hangdog glance perceived that they were unloading the two trunks, and also that the station agent, far ahead near the baggage car, had turned and was running toward him, making gestures. He laughed, and groaned as he laughed, when he noted

the first effect of his marital bliss upon Yellow Sky. He gripped his wife's arm firmly to his side, and they fled. Behind them the porter stood, chuckling fatuously.

2

The California express on the Southern Railway was due at Yellow Sky in twenty-one minutes. There were six men at the bar of the Weary Gentleman saloon. One was a drummer who talked a great deal and rapidly; three were Texans who did not care to talk at that time; and two were Mexican sheepherders, who did not talk as a general practice in the Weary Gentleman saloon. The barkeeper's dog lay on the boardwalk that crossed in front of the door. His head was on his paws, and he glanced drowsily here and there with the constant vigilance of a dog that is kicked on occasion. Across the sandy street were some vivid green grass plots, so wonderful in appearance, amid the sands that burned near them in a blazing sun, that they caused a doubt in the mind. They exactly resembled the grass mats used to represent lawns on the stage. At the cooler end of the railway station, a man without a coat sat in a tilted chair and smoked his pipe. The fresh-cut bank of the Rio Grande circled near the town, and there could be seen beyond it a great, plum-colored plain of mesquite. Save for the busy drummer and his companions in the saloon, Yellow Sky was dozing. The newcomer leaned gracefully upon the bar, and recited many tales with the confidence of a bard who has come upon a new field.

"—and at the moment that the old man fell downstairs with the bureau in his arms, the old woman was coming up with two scuttles of coal, and of course—"

The drummer's tale was interrupted by a young man who suddenly appeared in the open door. He cried, "Scratchy Wilson's drunk, and has turned loose with both hands." The two Mexicans at once set down their glasses and faded out of the rear entrance of the saloon.

But the information had made such an obvious cleft in every

skull in the room that the drummer was obliged to see its importance. All had become instantly solemn. "Say," said he, mystified, "what is this?" His three companions made the introductory gesture of eloquent speech; but the young man at the door forestalled them.

"It means, my friend," he answered, as he came into the saloon, "that for the next two hours this town won't be a health resort."

The barkeeper went to the door, and locked and barred it; reaching out of the window, he pulled in heavy wooden shutters, and barred them. Immediately a solemn, chapel-like gloom was upon the place. The drummer was looking from one to another.

"But say," he cried, "what is this, anyhow? You don't mean there is going to be a gun fight?"

"Don't know whether there'll be a fight or not," answered one man grimly, "but there'll be some shootin'—some good shootin'."

The young man who had warned them waved his hand. "Oh, there'll be a fight fast enough, if anyone wants it. Anybody can get a fight out there in the street. There's a fight just waiting."

The drummer seemed to be swayed between the interest of a foreigner and a perception of personal danger.

"What did you say his name was?" he asked.

"Scratchy Wilson," they answered in chorus.

"And will he kill anybody? What are you going to do? Does this happen often? Does he rampage around like this once a week or so? Can he break in that door?"

"No; he can't break down that door," replied the barkeeper. "He's tried it three times. But when he comes, you'd better lay down on the floor, stranger. He's dead sure to shoot at it, and a bullet may come through." Thereafter the drummer kept a strict eye upon the door. The time had not yet been called for him to hug the floor, but as a minor precaution, he sidled near to the wall. "Will he kill anybody?" he said again.

The men laughed low and scornfully at the question.

"He's out to shoot, and he's out for trouble. Don't see any good in experimentin' with him."

"But what do you do in a case like this? What do you do?"

A man responded, "Why, he and Jack Potter—"

"But," in chorus the other men interrupted, "Jack Potter's in San Anton'."

"Well, who is he? What's he got to do with it?"

"Oh, he's the town marshal. He goes out and fights Scratchy when he gets on one of these tears."

"Wow!" said the drummer, mopping his brow. "Nice job he's got."

The voices had toned away to mere whisperings. The drummer wished to ask further questions, which were born of an increasing anxiety and bewilderment; but when he attempted them, the men merely looked at him in irritation and motioned him to remain silent. A tense, waiting hush was upon them. In the deep shadows of the room, their eyes shone as they listened for sounds from the street. One man made three gestures at the barkeeper; and the latter, moving like a ghost, handed him a glass and a bottle, The man poured a full glass of whisky, and set down the bottle noiselessly. He gulped the whiskey in a swallow, and turned again toward the door in immovable silence. The drummer saw that the barkeeper, without a sound, had taken a Winchester from beneath the bar. Later he saw this individual beckoning to him, so he tiptoed across the room.

"You better come with me back of the bar."

"No, thanks," said the drummer, perspiring. "I'd rather be where I can make a break for the back door."

Whereupon the man of bottles made a kindly but peremptory gesture. The drummer obeyed it, and finding himself seated on a box with his head below the level of the bar, balm was laid upon his soul at sight of various zinc and copper fittings that bore a resemblance to armor plate. The barkeeper took a seat comfortably upon an adjacent box.

"You see," he whispered, "this here Scratchy Wilson is a wonder with a gun—a perfect wonder; and when he goes on the war trail, we hunt our holes—naturally. He's about the last one of the old gang that used to hang out along the river here. He's a

terror when he's drunk. When he's sober he's all right—kind of simple—wouldn't hurt a fly—nicest fellow in town. But when he's drunk—whoo!"

There were periods of stillness. "I wish Jack Potter was back from San Anton'," said the barkeeper. "He shot Wilson up once—in the leg—and he would sail in and pull out the kinks in this thing."

Presently they heard from a distance the sound of a shot, followed by three wild yowls. It instantly removed a bond from the men in the darkened saloon. There was a shuffling of feet. They looked at each other. "Here he comes," they said.

3

A man in a maroon-colored flannel shirt, which had been purchased for purposes of decoration, and made principally by some Jewish women on the East Side of New York, rounded a corner and walked into the middle of the main street of Yellow Sky. In either hand the man held a long, heavy, blue-black revolver. Often he yelled, and these cries rang through a semblance of a deserted village, shrilly flying over the roofs in a volume that seemed to have no relation to the ordinary vocal strength of a man. It was as if the surrounding stillness formed the arch of a tomb over him. These cries of ferocious challenge rang against walls of silence. And his boots had red tops with gilded imprints, of the kind beloved in winter by little sledding boys on the hillsides of New England.

The man's face flamed in a rage begot of whisky. His eyes, rolling, and yet keen for ambush, hunted the still doorways and windows. He walked with the creeping movement of the midnight cat. As it occurred to him, he roared menacing information. The long revolvers in his hands were as easy as straws; they were moved with an electric swiftness. The little fingers of each hand played sometimes in a musician's way. Plain from the low collar of the shirt, the cords of his neck straightened and sank, straightened and sank, as passion moved him. The only sounds were his terrible invitations. The calm

adobes preserved their demeanor at the passing of this small thing in the middle of the street.

There was no offer of fight—no offer of fight. The man called to the sky. There were no attractions. He bellowed and fumed and swayed his revolvers here and everywhere.

The dog of the barkeeper of the Weary Gentleman saloon had not appreciated the advance of events. He yet lay dozing in front of his master's door. At sight of the dog, the man paused and raised his revolver humorously. At sight of the man, the dog sprang up and walked diagonally away, with a sullen head, and growling. The man yelled, and the dog broke into a gallop. As it was about to enter an alley, there was a loud noise, a whistling, and something spat the ground directly before it. The dog screamed, and wheeling in terror, galloped headlong in a new direction. Again there was a noise, a whistling, and sand was kicked viciously before it. Fearstricken, the dog turned and flurried like an animal in a pen. The man stood laughing, his weapons at his hips.

Ultimately the man was attracted by the closed door of the Weary Gentleman saloon. He went to it, and hammering with a revolver, demanded drink.

The door remaining imperturbable, he picked a bit of paper from the walk, and nailed it to the framework with a knife. He then turned his back contemptuously upon this popular resort, and walking to the opposite side of the street and spinning there on his heel quickly and lithely, fired at the bit of paper. He missed it by a half inch. He swore at himself, and went away. Later he comfortably fusilladed the windows of his most intimate friend. The man was playing with this town; it was a toy for him.

But still there was no offer of fight. The name of Jack Potter, his ancient antagonist, entered his mind, and he concluded that it would be a glad thing if he should go to Potter's house, and by bombardment induce him to come out and fight. He moved in the direction of his desire, chanting Apache scalp music.

When he arrived at it, Potter's house presented the same still

front as had the other adobes. Taking up a strategic position, the man howled a challenge. But this house regarded him as might a great stone god. It gave no sign. After a decent wait, the man howled further challenges, mingling with them wonderful epithets.

Presently there came the spectacle of a man churning himself into deepest rage over the immobility of a house. He fumed at it as the winter wind attacks a prairie cabin in the North. To the distance there should have gone the sound of a tumult like the fighting of two hundred Mexicans. As necessity bade him, he paused for breath or to reload his revolvers.

4

Potter and his bride walked sheepishly and with speed. Sometimes they laughed together shamefacedly and low.

"Next corner, dear," he said finally.

They put forth the efforts of a pair walking bowed against a strong wind. Potter was about to raise a finger to point the first appearance of the new home when, as they circled the corner, they came face to face with a man in a maroon-colored shirt, who was feverishly pushing cartridges into a large revolver. Upon the instant the man dropped his revolver to the ground and, like lightning, whipped another from its holster. The second weapon was aimed at the bridegroom's chest.

There was a silence. Potter's mouth seemed to be merely a grave for his tongue. He exhibited an instinct to at once loosen his arm from the woman's grip, and he dropped the bag to the sand. As for the bride, her face had gone as yellow as old cloth. She was a slave to hideous rites, gazing at the apparitional snake.

The two men faced each other at a distance of three paces. He of the revolver smiled with a new and quiet ferocity.

"Tried to sneak up on me," he said. "Tried to sneak up on me!" His eyes grew more baleful. As Potter made a slight movement, the man thrust his revolver venomously forward. "No; don't you do it, Jack Potter. Don't you move a finger toward a gun just yet. Don't you move an eyelash. The time has

come for me to settle with you, and I'm goin' to do it my own way, and loaf along with no interferin'. So if you don't want a gun bent on you, just mind what I tell you."

Potter looked at his enemy. "I ain't got a gun on me, Scratchy," he said. "Honest, I ain't." He was stiffening and steadying, but yet somewhere at the back of his mind a vision of the Pullman floated: the sea-green figured velvet, the shining brass, silver, and glass, the wood that gleamed as darkly brilliant as the surface of a pool of oil—all the glory of the marriage, the environment of the new estate. "You know I fight when it comes to fighting. Scratchy Wilson; but I ain't got a gun on me. You'll have to do all the shootin' yourself."

His enemy's face went livid. He stepped forward, and lashed his weapon to and fro before Potter's chest. "Don't you tell me you ain't got no gun on you, you whelp. Don't tell me no lie like that. There ain't a man in Texas ever seen you without no gun. Don't take me for no kid." His eye blazed with light, and his throat worked like a pump.

"I ain't takin' you for no kid," answered Potter. His heels had not moved an inch backward. "I'm takin' you for a damn fool. I tell you I ain't got a gun, and I ain't. If you're goin' to shoot me up, you better begin now; you'll never get a chance like this again."

So much enforced reasoning had told on Wilson's rage; he was calmer. "If you ain't got a gun, why ain't you got a gun?" he sneered. "Been to Sunday school?"

"I ain't got a gun because I've just come from San Anton' with my wife. I'm married," said Potter. "And if I'd thought there was going to be any galoots like you prowling around when I brought my wife home, I'd had a gun, and don't you forget it."

"Married!" said Scratchy, not at all comprehending.

"Yes, married. I'm married," said Potter distinctly.

"Married?" said Scratchy. Seemingly for the first time, he saw the drooping, drowning woman at the other man's side. "No!" he said. He was like a creature allowed a glimpse of another world. He moved a pace backward, and his arm, with the revolver, dropped to his side. "Is this the lady?" he asked.

"Yes; this is the lady," answered Potter.

There was another period of silence.

"Well," said Wilson at last, slowly, "I s'pose it's all off now."

"It's all off if you say so, Scratchy. You know I didn't make the trouble." Potter lifted his valise.

"Well, I 'low it's off, Jack," said Wilson. He was looking at the ground. "Married!" He was not a student of chivalry; it was merely that in the presence of this foreign condition he was a simple child of the earlier plains. He picked up his starboard revolver, and placing both weapons in their holsters, he went away. His feet made funnel-shaped tracks in the heavy sand.

THE HICKORY HEART

(Continued from Page 25)

hope born in her in that moment of thunder and terror.

"What is it, Tam?" she begged. "The Jorgens? Did they —"

He told her.

She didn't faint, but she came closer to it than he had ever seen any woman before without keeling over. That was because she had an idea, a sudden, passionate idea.

He had something similar. He glanced at the sun. It was maybe half an hour high.

"I reckon if you got saddled and going, girl," he said, "you might likely meet Jim now on the road along Arroyo Seco."

"That's exactly what I'm going to do."

"Bring him straight back here. But don't forget one thing, Julie. Your promise."

"Promise, Tam?"

"I said no talk of my doings today, then or later. There'll be a bellering of wild talk about all this. But I don't want Jim Bentley ever to figure this out even for himself. Remember, Julie. The hickory heart is peculiar."

"Peculiar?" She put a small hand on his broad breast to feel the steady beating of his own heart. "Peculiar, Tam? It's a great dark mystery. And a power and a glory. I reckon I ought to know."

The Black Killer

by HOWARD E. MORGAN

Black Jack Brice would stop at nothing to prevent his rival timber cruiser, Ken Atwood, from getting to Three Rivers with an option on the property Brice also sought. But Atwood knew that Brice was too clever to make an open fight of it; accidents happened frequently in the wild, and that is what it would be for Atwood. However, neither man had reckoned on the Black Killer.

EYES AND EARS INTENTLY alert, Atwood turned at right angles down a wooded slope. Below him stretched a rock-littered valley. Traveling at a mile-eating pace—that curious half walk, half dog trot peculiar to men who have lived for long in the North country—the young timber cruiser cut straight across the valley. There was no abatement in his watchfulness, however.

For the past couple of days he had felt that he was being watched. Not once had he glimpsed his furtive shadow. But visual evidence really was not necessary, for now, at the end of the second day of his silent supervision, he was practically certain of the identity of the man who was shadowing him so persistently: Black Jack Brice!

It *must* be Brice. There were few men in these Northwoods who could keep pace with Ken Atwood when Atwood chose to extend himself. And extend himself he had during the past

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forty-eight hours. Brice might do it, however; an old-timer, Brice was—a skilled woodsman, and a giant in stature, possessing the strength and endurance of a bull moose. Also, Atwood knew that there was very good reason indeed why Black Jack Brice should be following him, just at this time.

In his capacity as timber cruiser, representing the Great Northern Lumber Company, Atwood had, as usual, beaten his competitors in securing rights to a valuable tract of timber. The Hodgkinson Lumber Company—the Great Northern's most serious rival—had sent three timber cruisers out on the same errand—Black Jack Brice and two others. Assured in the beginning that they were alone in the field, the Hodgkinson men had traveled together and taken their time.

But Ken Atwood, starting out a week after his rivals, had beaten them to their objective. Now, he was returning to Three Rivers with an option on the property in question, signed by Joel Perkins, the owner. This option was an informal document inscribed with a stub of lead pencil on a square of yellow note paper in Joel Perkins' handwriting. The average backwoodsman, suspicious of all things bearing a legal atmosphere, will sign no printed or typewritten document, containing unfamiliar phraseology.

Black Jack Brice knew—or strongly suspected—the exact nature of this document. If it was the usual pencil scrawl, he could readily change it; if, by chance, it was a typed or printed legal document, it would be necessary for him to seek out Joel Perkins, and, after destroying the stolen option, persuade Perkins to sign another.

Although Atwood never before had come to the point of open warfare with Black Jack Brice, he knew that the big timber cruiser's reputation was shady at best. It was common knowledge that Brice would hesitate at nothing short of murder to attain his ends. It almost went without saying, therefore, that, right now, Black Jack Brice was exceedingly interested in securing the option on Joel Perkins' valuable timber tract, which option reposed in Ken Atwood's pocket; and that, to gain possession of this coveted document, he was prepared to kill.

The previous night, Brice had spied on Atwood's camp. Lacking either in courage or opportunity, the unseen watcher had finally gone on. Starting out earlier than usual this morning, Atwood had hoped to locate his persistent shadow before the latter got under way. Evidently, however, his enemy had made an early start too, for the young timber cruiser's keen eyes had discovered no sign of smoke. At times, he *had* caught a faint acrid odor drifting lazily with the chill autumn breeze, which odor was faintly redolent of wood smoke.

"Cautious cuss. Got that fire of his well banked," Atwood told himself.

That he would come upon the camp made by his enemy the night before, somewhere in the valley that now fronted him, Atwood was sure.

In almost the exact geometric center of the alder-clad valley, Atwood made the expected discovery. In a semi open space beside a little spring, there was a litter of water-blackened cinders. Assured that his man had gone on, or was, perhaps, awaiting him further on, Atwood was about to push swiftly across the open space when a suggestion of movement in the nearby thicket caused him to stop in his tracks.

At first glance, he identified the dark object, half hidden in the head-high wire grass just within the thicket, as a black bear cub. But the animal acted queerly; either it was playing, rolling ponderously about through the long grass, or, the beast was sick. Certainly no full-grown animal in possession of all its faculties would voluntarily be going through the antics this particular animal was going through.

Rifle ready, Atwood circled widely about. Then, abruptly, he discovered that the beast rolling about there in the thicket was a dog—a huge black beast with long shaggy hair. And the poor devil was undoubtedly sick. Even at a distance Atwood saw that the beast's half-open jaws were fringed with foam; and the animal was undoubtedly in agony.

Ken Atwood knew dogs and loved them. He had seen this big fellow before in possession of Black Jack Brice. The dog's name was Mox, he recalled. Almost instantly Atwood realized that the

black dog was suffering from strychnine poisoning. Just how the animal could have obtained this poison, unless it had been deliberately fed to him, Atwood could not understand. But he wasted little time in futile conjecture; valuable though every minute was to him, it was impossible for Ken Atwood's sympathetic nature to ignore the suffering of any living thing—particularly a dog.

Quick inspection assured him that the poison had but very recently been assimilated by the dog. There was then a chance—a slim one, true—of saving the animal's life.

With frantic haste, Atwood tore open his pack, and, with his knife, sliced off a goodly chunk of suet from a piece of bear meat, then, placing the bear fat in a pan, he hastily built a fire.

In a matter of minutes, the suet was reduced to simmering hot grease. Although he anticipated some difficulty in administering this unpleasant medicine to the sick dog, Atwood approached the writhing beast confidently. Armed with a stick of wood about a foot long and a couple of inches in diameter and a piece of stout babiche cord, he drew near until he stood directly over the suffering animal. He thrust the stick of wood downward.

Instantly, the beast caught the stick in its great jaws. Swiftly then, Atwood dropped on a knee, and, before the animal could relinquish its hold upon the stick, the man took several turns about the dog's snout with the cord, thus securely anchoring the stick in its jaws, and, incidentally, holding its mouth open.

Despite these precautions, it took Atwood some time to force the liquid bear fat down the sick beast's throat. With his object finally accomplished, however, Atwood slashed the babiche cord with his knife and sprang free.

But his hasty movements were unnecessary. The big dog made no attempt to snap at him. Instead it rolled over and crawled slowly away into the thicket.

Wiping the perspiration from his face, Atwood, somewhat sheepishly, collected his duffle, strapped the pack on his back and started away. A glance at his watch told him that he had lost the better part of an hour.

"Now, wasn't that a damn fool trick," he told himself, "when

time means money—the big snows due almost any day—and me, I have to stop and doctor up a fool dog. Doggone hound probably ain't worth his salt. Still and all, he sure was a beauty. Wonder how he come to get hold of that poison? Don't seem possible that Brice fed it to him. He's a bad one and all that, Brice is, but—doggone—a man's got to be suthin' less even than a skunk to feed poison to a dog. And I don't guess Brice is that bad."

Several hours later Atwood came out upon a spruce-clad ridge top on the opposite side of the valley. He found a bit of jerked beef and sat on a flat rock in the sun munching the tough, stringy morsel, which was to serve as his noonday meal. Just as he was about to start away, a black shape crossed a splotch of checkered shadow nearby and approached him doubtfully.

Atwood's eyes lighted. His visitor was Mox, the black dog, and, at a single glance, Atwood knew that here was an entirely different animal from the tortured beast he had come upon that morning. Although still a bit uncertain on its legs as a result of the sickness, the dog's almond eyes were bright and its long red tongue was moist and healthy looking.

"Howdy, pup!" Atwood greeted. "And how you feeling, now? Like to bite a chunk out of the doctor, would you? No?"

For a long minute the dog itself seemed undecided. Then, abruptly, its tufted ears lay flat and its bushy tail waved ever so slightly from side to side.

"Well now, what do you think of that? Feelin' friendly-like, eh? Sure enough—step right over and shake hands on it."

And, as though understanding exactly what the man had said, the big dog approached confidently. But instead of thrusting its paw into the proffered hand, it thrust its moist muzzle almost roughly against Atwood's leg. The young timber cruiser drew back involuntarily. Then he laughed.

"Don't scare me like that again," he warned. "Doggone, thought you was going to take a piece out of my laig."

Assured now that the animal's intentions were friendly, Atwood came to his feet and started briskly away, calling upon the dog to follow.

And follow it did. That night when Atwood made camp, Mox, the black malemute, lay, nose to the little fire, green eyes alert, watching its new master's every movement. And later when Atwood rolled in his blankets before the dwindling fire, the dog lay close at the man's side. As usual, Atwood was sound asleep the instant he relaxed.

He came awake, suddenly, in response to a violent urge that seemed literally to shake the sleep from his drowsy eyes. At first, he was inclined to curse his very sensitive nerves, which brought him awake, apparently without cause or reason. Then he noticed that the dog was gone. And as he lay there, scarcely moving, staring up at the gray sky, a low, throaty growl reached his quick ears . . .then a man's voice, low pitched, placating. And as he listened, breathlessly, words came to him.

"Good dog, good dog," the voice was saying. "It's only me, pup. Be quiet, now. Good dog—"

Black Jack Brice! Atwood saw his midnight visitor then, crouching, half hidden behind the bole of a thick trunked beech tree a dozen yards away. And Mox, the black malemute, lay, belly hugging the ground, halfway between the beech tree and the fire.

With cautious fingers Atwood found the gun beneath the blankets at his side. Then he laughed softly. "That you, Brice?" he called.

For a moment there was no answer. Then: "Yeah, it's me," came hesitatingly from the shadowed darkness beneath the beech tree. "Call off that damned cur."

"Call him off? Why don't you talk to him? He is—or rather was—your dog."

"Yeah, I know." Brice's voice was still doubtful. "But he's an ugly devil. I never could do nothin' with him."

Ken Atwood came slowly to his feet. "Oh, so that's it, eh?" he muttered as though to himself. "And so you fed him poison?"

Black Jack Brice had advanced tentatively. He now stood in the little open space, big body looming hugely against the background of gray boulders. "Well, what if I did?"

"But you *did*—poison him," Atwood persisted.

"Sure I did. What the hell of it?"

Fortunately, or unfortunately, Black Jack Brice could not see Ken Atwood very clearly. However, it was Black Jack Brice's boast that he feared no man. Having been discovered in his midnight visit, he was boiling with impotent rage. Chances are, therefore, that he might have welcomed Ken Atwood's angry attitude.

Even so, however, the big man was at a loss to know what to expect, as Atwood came purposefully toward him. It was not until the yellow-haired, blue-eyed young timber cruiser stood within three feet of him, that Black Jack Brice realized the effect his offhand admission had made. Ken Atwood came close, so close that his outthrust face was within a foot of Black Jack Brice's. Then the young timber cruiser spoke through tight lips.

"A feller what'll poison a dog, Brice, is worse than a carcajou," he said, speaking slowly, very calmly. "I always heard you was a skunk. Now, I know it."

Black Jack Brice's big body tensed. His huge hands clenched. He struck out swiftly at a pair of gleaming blue eyes and a shock of long yellow hair. But when his fist reached the spot where its objective had been, that objective had moved. Then, Ken Atwood's clubbed fist struck Brice full in the face.

Although Atwood was much lighter than his opponent, the force behind that smashing blow was tremendous. Brice's thick body jolted solidly backward. His heel encountered a frostcovered rock and he sat down heavily. He was on his feet like a cat, and, growling deep in his throat like an ugly beast, he sprang forward, hairy hands outstretched, gripping, toward young Atwood's lean brown throat.

Black Jack Brice had heard much of Atwood's fighting prowess; but after having watched the slim-bodied young timber cruiser for some time and observing the yellow hair, blue eyes and the ever-ready laughter with which young Atwood greeted everyone, friend and enemy alike, he had come to the conclusion that the kid's reputation had been greatly exaggerated.

But his opinions in this regard were due soon to be painfully reversed. Two smashing blows, one following the other in quick

succession, landing flush on the point of his chin, brought Brice up, teetering dazedly on his heels. He started to fight then in dead earnest. But out of the dozen or more blows aimed at that elusive yellow head, not a single one found its mark.

"Dog killer! You mangy coyote! You low-down skunk!"

Which low-voiced epithets were accompanied by another sledge-hammer blow to the big man's jaw. Black Jack Brice was beginning to wish that he was some place else. His legs shook under him. He was dizzy and sick.

The end came, abruptly. A wide-swinging haymaker caught him beneath an ear and he collapsed and lay, groaning, flat on his back on the cold ground. And as the big man lay there, whining, groaning and making self-pitying noises in his throat, Mox, the black malemute, came close, and, jowls slavering, stood over the fallen man, its ugly jaws seemingly yearning toward the black-whiskered throat. Breathing hard, Ken Atwood reached down and caught the big dog by the scruff of its neck and thrust it back.

"Lay off, you black killer," he commanded. "That—that—carrion ain't fit for a regular dog to sink its teeth into."

Black Jack Brice came up on an elbow. "That's just what he is," he gasped. "That's what they called him up in the Big Windy country where I got him—the Black Killer. And he's a killer, right enough. I wish you luck with him. I—I—hope he tears your heart out, you—you—"

"That's enough from you, Brice," Atwood interrupted sharply. "Climb up on your pins and hotfoot it out o' here. And if you call on me again—without an invitation—I'll let you have a dose of hot lead. Or maybe," he called, as Brice stumbled away, "I'll sic Mox on you."

Atwood started out earlier than usual next morning, and for perhaps the first time in his carefree life, there were lines of worriment on his youthful face. Never having been one to fret about crossing his bridges until he came to them, Atwood had not seriously considered the threat to his safety—and hence, the

safe delivery of that valuable document now reposing in an inner pocket, to his employers—until Brice's visit the night before. This carefree attitude of his had all but gotten him into trouble, he told himself, bitterly. If it had not been for Mox, Bright might well have accomplished his purpose.

The mere fact that he had failed in his first attempt, however, did not by any chance mean that Black Jack Brice was through. Far, far from it. Ken Atwood knew men, and, even if he had not been familiar with Black Jack Brice's reputation, he would unhesitatingly have credited Brice with a bulldog tenacity of purpose which would stop at nothing to gain the desired ends.

Of course, there would be no open warfare; Brice was far too crafty to resort to such crude methods. There were other ways—a thousand and one ways in fact—of bringing about the desired result. Accidents are common in the north country; manufactured accidents which are seldom ticketed with the name of murder are also common. Brice might choose any one of a hundred natural methods to gain possession of that option. And, Atwood told himself, scowling, from now on he would most certainly have to watch his step.

Not that he was afraid of Black Jack Brice; but the everlasting caution he would be obliged to exercise from now on would slow him up, and time was a valuable consideration. It was late autumn. Within a week, two weeks at the most, the first big storm of the year was due. It was absolutely necessary that he reach Three Rivers before the snows. He was not equipped for winter travel and none knew better than he the difficulties facing a man—no matter how skilled or strong of heart and body he might be—in traveling a winter trail without adequate equipment.

All during the morning Atwood traveled slowly; his every movement typified a man nervously alert. Always Mox, the Black Killer, was close at hand. Sometimes the big dog trotted along before him; sometimes the faithful beast followed close at its new master's heels. If Atwood's troubled thoughts had not so completely possessed him he would have been pleasantly thrilled at the dog's devotion. As it was, the fact that he was to have a

companion through those uncertain, troubled days that most surely faced him, brought some easement to his harried thoughts.

Atwood was in familiar country, now. There was but one passable trail down through the hills. If time had permitted he would have circled widely about, trusting to his greater speed and familiarity with the country to throw his shadow off his track; but, under the circumstances, there was nothing he could do but follow the beaten trail.

It was just before midday when he came to Madman's Canyon. This canyon was little more than a deep, jagged gash, slanting diagonally down across the rocky hillside like a huge crack in a crockery bowl. In places, the canyon was hundreds of feet deep. At its bottom, a tiny stream trickled slowly down over the jagged rocks. At a spot where the gash in the mountainside was narrowest, a big log had been thrown across, adequately spanning the yawning chasm. On the opposite side, the trail snaked down through the rock-littered foothills of Panther Mountain.

As Atwood approached this log it so happened that the dog was some distance ahead of him. When he reached the embryo bridge, he found Mox standing with forefeet on the near end of the log. Sensing Atwood's nearness, the animal turned and whined uncertainly. Atwood laughed. "Go on, you big baby," he commanded good-naturedly. But the dog held back, still whining, and reached for Atwood's hand with a long, red tongue.

"Scared," Atwood muttered. "Dog-goned if he's not."

For a long minute Atwood inspected the foot-thick log spanning the chasm, doubtfully. He was wondering how best to get the dog across. It was not unusual, he knew, for a dog to refuse to cross a log like this one and he harbored no critical ill will against Mox for refusing to venture out upon that slippery, twenty-foot bridge.

Of course, he did not intend leaving his new friend behind; still, the big malemute weighed close to one hundred pounds, and, although he *could* carry the dog in his arms, the beast might conceivably become panicky—probably in the center of the log—and dangerous difficulties might ensue. But he did not intend carrying the dog unless it was absolutely necessary.

With this in mind Atwood started confidently out upon the log. Half a dozen feet from the near bank he turned and called encouragingly. To his astonishment he found the dog at his heels; the animal's roach hair was lifted stiffly about its neck, and a rumbling growl came from deep in his throat.

"Come on now, pup. Just you follow the old man. Everything's all right."

But when he started away again, the dog reached out and fastened its teeth about his trouser leg just above the knee. Gently, but firmly, the beast tugged backward. So gentle but at the same time so insistent was that firm tug upon his leg, that Atwood stopped without for an instant losing his balance.

"Now what—?" he began. But the words died in his throat as a warning crackling sound came to him. Instantly, Atwood sprang backward. At the same instant the dog relinquished its hold on his leg.

And then, before his wide eyes, Atwood saw the big log buckle. The slippery surface beneath his feet slanted abruptly downward. With one last frantic effort he turned and leaped into the air. The toes of his moccasins landed on firm ground. Then, the loose gravel slid away from beneath this inadequate toe hold and he fell heavily. Clutching frantically at the gravelly bank with outstretched fingers, he felt himself sliding over the lip of the chasm. Like a drowning man grabbing at a straw, his groping fingers tightened about the tip of a jagged rock.

Providentially, the rock held, and, little by little he pulled his body up onto firm ground. Crouching there, shivering like a man with the ague, he peered down into the black abyss. The big log lay two hundred feet below, a mass of white splinters among the up-jutting rocks.

Atwood came back to a shuddering sense of reality, abruptly. The dog came to him and nuzzled his cheek lovingly. Throwing an arm about the big dog's body, Atwood came on trembling legs to his feet. His face was white and his lips twitched; but these evidences of inward perturbation were not altogether due to his close escape from a terrible death. That log had been neatly

chopped, on the under side, almost in two, and the job hidden by mud and bark!

An hour later, after Atwood had felled a towering spruce on the edge of Madman's Canyon a mile or so below, directing the fall of the great tree so that it adequately spanned the chasm, Mox, the black malemute, readily followed its master across.

For the balance of the day, Atwood was morose and thoughtful. What to do? Other "accidents" would most certainly happen. Under the circumstances would he not be justified in seeking out Brice and settling things once and for all?

But a fight would almost certainly end in a killing. Ken Atwood knew himself well enough to realize that he would kill Black Jack Brice as readily, and with as little hurt to his conscience, as he would crush a snake under his heel. Nevertheless, something deep within him rebelled at the thought; he couldn't cut Brice down in cold blood. That was all there was to it. Of course, if the black-whiskered devil would only come out in the open, and—but he wouldn't do it. Hence, nothing could be done but wait and watch and hope that some new development would furnish a clue to a solution of the matter.

All during the afternoon, fleecy gray clouds scurried across the sky. A bitter wind came out of the north, carrying definite hint of the winter that was to come. Atwood scouted the possibility of snow. It was still early, too early for snow. But when he made camp that night he automatically chose a sheltered spot which offered protection of a sort, in case the unexpected happened in the form of a snowstorm.

With the coming of the bitter wind it seemed as though Mox had taken a new lease on life. The big dog cavorted around and around Atwood like a healthy colt.

"You're a cold weather hound," Atwood said grinning. "I can see that. Like it, don't you, pup? Well, me too, I like the snow. But not just yet," he amended hastily.

The dog's ebullience continued as Atwood puttered about, taking unusual care in constructing his camp for the night. While the man was busy preparing supper, the dog roused a snowshoe

rabbit and started away in playful pursuit. The wind snapped and cracked and howled dismally. A few vagrant flakes of snow at intervals accompanied the wind.

The dog had not returned when the fragrant stew, consisting of rabbit meat and dried vegetables, was ready. Atwood set aside a portion for the malemute. Just as he was about to begin his lonely repast, a sharp report sounded. Ordinarily, Atwood would have unhesitatingly identified that sound as the report of a rifle. But the noisy wind at times accurately approximated the sound of a rifle shot. At the time, therefore, he gave the matter little thought.

It was not until he had finished eating and the dog had not returned that he began to consider the import of that sound in a more serious light. Perhaps Black Jack Brice had shot Mox . . .

Disturbed by this suspicion, Atwood circled widely about, calling and whistling. But there was no sign of Mox.

Black clouds finally replaced the gray ones and an unnatural blackness obscured the gray barrens. Forced against his will to return to camp, Atwood sat, back against a boulder, smoking, and, at intervals, whistling and calling. But it had been a hard day and Atwood was tired; eventually he slept, propped uncomfortably against the moss-covered boulder.

He dreamed unpleasant dreams. Always, these dreams contained ugly pictures of Black Jack Brice. Always did he find himself in some terrible danger; always the nightmare broke and vanished as he struggled with his enemy.

In the midst of one of these unpleasant nightmares he came awake. The fire was low and he was chilled to the bone. Just for an instant reality evaded him. He made out, indistinctly, a moving shape close at hand. Some inchoate instinct told him to avoid that furtive shape. He cried out, involuntarily, and sought to struggle to his feet. Too late! Black Jack Brice, clubbed rifle in hand, appeared, jinnilike, in the tiny circle of firelight. The clubbed gun lifted—and fell with crushing force atop Ken Atwood's head. With a gusty sigh the young timber cruiser sprawled back against the boulder.

Atwood awoke in response to a persistent tugging at his throat. It was as though strong fingers fastened about the loose flannel shirt at his neck, were shaking him violently to and fro. With each shaking motion his sore head bumped painfully against the boulder. Half conscious, cursing hoarsely, he reached out to protest against the painful shaking to which he was being subjected. His numbed fingers encountered a hairy body. Then, a hot tongue brushed his cheek. Still clinging with both hands to the dog's curly hair, Atwood pulled himself up on his knees.

The fire was out. He was very, very cold. There was a painful throbbing in his head, accompanied by spells of sweating sickness. When his eyes first fluttered open he could scarcely believe what he saw. The ground was white and it was snowing hard. Finally getting a grip on himself, Atwood discovered that the dog, its strong jaws locked upon his flannel shirt, had been shaking him. And the beast was injured; cursory inspection disclosed a deep, red-clotted groove running across the top of its head and along a shoulder. The injury had undoubtedly been caused by a bullet.

"Did get you, didn't he, pup?" Atwood muttered sympathetically. "Nasty one, sure enough. Knocked you out for a spell, didn't it? And—and—he got me, too. Hit me over the head—with a club, I guess."

Atwood's first action was to build a fire. Thereafter, as soon as his numbed fingers would permit, he carefully washed the dog's wound. Then, and not until then, did he attempt to confirm the loss of the option. It was gone as he had known it would be.

"Well, there ain't no use cryin' over spilt milk, pup," he said as he sipped a pannikin of scalding tea. "We're both here—you and me, that is—alive and kickin'. And that's suthin'. And we ain't licked yet. Not by a jugful. We ain't quittin', understand, until Mr. Black Jack Brice turns them papers over to Old Man Hodgkinson at Three Rivers. This snow is goin' to bother us, of course. But it's goin' to bother *him*, too."

For several long minutes Ken Atwood sat rubbing his sore head and staring meditatively into the roaring fire.

"It's like this, pup," he soliloquized. "This Brice feller, as I figure him, is one of them cocksure birds. Gosh-awful strong and all that. He ain't afraid o' nothin'. Figures he knows this North country so good that he's got it by the tail, so to speak. Well, maybe he does and maybe he has; but, I'm just goin' to play the hunch, Mox, that he's just kind o' givin' this here blizzard the laugh and is hotfootin' it for Three Rivers. Now, if I'm any judge of storms, I'm wagerin' that this here storm is due to be a humdinger. He ain't got proper equipment; neither have we.

"There ain't a human bein'—exceptin' only us two—within a hundred miles in any direction. Therefore, neither of us can just happen in on some friend or other and borry a pair of snowshoes. But we got to have snowshoes, Mox, and too, we got to have a sled. As a maker of snowshoes I'm a good swimmer, but, we're goin' to take a stab at buildin' a pair, pronto; and too, we're goin' to have a sled. Then—and not until then—will we start thinkin' about Mr. Black Jack Brice."

Ken Atwood's derogatory opinion of his own abilities was hardly justified by the results. He worked steadily all that day and until late that night. By mid-morning of the next day the snowshoes were completed. They were far from perfect, but they were sturdy and would serve his purpose. The hand sled when finally finished was unwieldy and too heavy, but it possessed the saving element of sturdiness. Atwood's healthy constitution had quickly succeeded in throwing off the effects of his injury. All that remained was a blue-black lump the size of a goose egg on the top of his head.

There was only one possible trail that Brice could follow on his way south toward Three Rivers. Atwood had not expected to find definite trace of the thief for at least a couple of days. Hence, he was pleasantly surprised when, just as he was starting out on the morning of the second day, he came upon footprints in the snow. Although blurred somewhat by the drifting snow, those tracks had unquestionably been made by Black Jack Brice. The big man wore no snowshoes.

The backbone of the blizzard was broken, but it was still blowing and it was still bitter cold. Atwood's hastily constructed

snowshoes worked admirably. He had fashioned a harness out of strips of moosehide and Mox drew the bulky sled—loaded heavily with supplies and equipment, which Atwood usually carried on his back—with a willingness that spoke of much experience as a sled dog. Despite the wind which had distributed the deep snow thinly in most open places, the blizzard had left them two to three feet of sandlike, icy fluff in its wake. In the wooded valleys the snow was consistently deep. Only a man equipped with snowshoes could travel with any degree of speed.

The dog experienced no difficulty in keeping pace with Atwood's best efforts. So it was that they made exceedingly good time; far, far better time, Atwood knew, than Black Jack Brice with all his great strength and endurance.

Even so, however, two days passed without a sight of the fugitive.

"He probably doesn't suspect for one minute that he's being followed," Atwood told himself. "But he sure is hustlin'."

At the end of the second day, after he had first discovered the enemy's tracks, Atwood realized that his eyes were bothering him. For the past two days the sun had shone brightly and the reflected glare from the newly fallen snow was of the stuff that caused snow blindness. Atwood appreciated this all too well. But so certain was he that the man he sought was near at hand, that he had pushed on and on, hoping each succeeding hour to come within sight of his quarry.

He knew, this second night, that he had attempted too much. Still, so exhausted was he and so confident, somehow, that his eyes were as yet not seriously affected, that he gave the matter little thought, and, after a hasty meal, rolled in his blankets and was almost immediately sound asleep.

He had promised himself to take things easier next day, but when, at the end of the first hour's travel, he discovered a definite uncertainty in the tracks he was following, desire got the better of his good judgment. By noon Brice's tracks had become more and more erratic; several times the thief had fallen; often he had traveled around and around in short, stubborn circles. But

always he had struggled through these uncertain periods and had once more turned to the trail and plodded on.

With a blue bandanna handkerchief tied about his eyes and slitted just enough to see through, Ken Atwood hurried on. Night came with no sign of the fugitive; but Atwood knew that now the chase was a matter of hours only. That night he suffered intensely with his eyes. Next morning both eyes were puffed and swollen and he could hardly see. Nevertheless, he started out early, and, as he had guessed, the last lap of that stern chase was on.

Shortly before midday the fresh tracks he was following showed unmistakable signs that the man who had made them was bereft, temporarily at least, of his senses.

"Gone cuckoo, sure enough," Atwood told himself. "Probably's short o' grub and maybe *his* eyes has gone back on him, too."

And this latter was the true explanation of those crazy tracks, which twisted and turned and circled about in mad meanderings.

And then, atop a windswept ride, Atwood came upon his man. Black Jack Brice lay flat upon his face in the snow. His pack had become undone and trailed in the snow about his body. An unmittened hand was frozen to the barrel of his rifle. His face was gray with the pallor of death, and, at first glance, Ken Atwood thought that the man really was dead. It was not until he laid an ear close against the unconscious man's breast that he detected the fluttering heartbeat which told that Black Jack Brice still lived. The coveted paper Atwood found rolled in an empty cartridge in the thief's belt.

For an hour the young timber cruiser worked over the unconscious man. Once, the thief roused and groaned, but almost immediately lapsed again into unconsciousness. Atwood persisted in his attempts to revive the man who had robbed him, until his own exhaustion forced him to stop. His sight was almost gone. Only blurred pinpoints of light penetrated through his puffed and swollen lids.

Even yet, however, Atwood was not fully impressed with the seriousness of his situation. He was only a couple of days'

journey from Three Rivers. He should be able to make it, easily. Of course, it would be hard work. He would be obliged to carry Brice's carcass on the sled; that is, if the coyote continued to live. He would again take the supplies on his back. There was plenty of food. Yes, with the help of good old Mox, he should be able to make it, easily.

But, next morning when Atwood opened his smarting eyes, he could not see! The gray wilderness was gone; a Stygian blackness enveloped him in folds of smothering dread.

For a time the young timber cruiser was on the verge of panic, but his resourceful sanity soon came to his rescue. His wits, sharpened by the blindness, rapidly and accurately conjured up possible ways and means out of his predicament. He called the dog, and, taking the beast's shaggy head in his hands, he looked with his sightless eyes down into the intelligent animal's wrinkled face.

"It's up to you, Mox," he said, "from now on—everything—is up to you."

And, as though it understood exactly what the master had said, the big dog surged close and thrust its cold muzzle lovingly against the man's face. Atwood collected the camp duffle as best he could and lashed the heavy pack to his back. Brice was running a fever, but was, at the moment, sleeping, breathing stertorously and mumbling and cursing in his sleep.

With much effort, Atwood hauled the thief's body up on the sled, wrapped it warmly in many blankets, and securely bound the sick man, so that by no possible chance could he fall off the sled. Then, after much fumbling effort, he harnessed the dog. Just before starting away, he fastened a rod-long strip of babiche thong, one end to the dog's neck and the other end to his left wrist. And then, with a muttered prayer, Atwood started off.

From the very first, Mox, the Black Killer, seemed to understand exactly what was expected of him. Without an instant's hesitation he started along the open ridge and thence across a wide expanse of unbroken whiteness which was a frozen lake, as though altogether certain of himself. But Ken Atwood, stumbling on at the end of that slender cord, felt less confident.

There was an unnatural flush on his dark cheeks—the flush of fever—and at times he mumbled crazily. At frequent intervals he argued petulantly with some imaginary person and always he tugged on the cord, striving to turn to the left. But always the dog repelled these urgings and continued on straight ahead—toward the south and Three Rivers.

Three days later, men at Camp Two of the Great Northern Lumber Company at Three Rivers made out a strange sight: A man, a dog, and a sled. Even at a distance it was apparent that the man was either crazy or drunk. He wore but one snowshoe. At frequent intervals he cut queer capers, dancing, pirouetting about; then, he would plod on slowly, wearily, like a man in the last stages of exhaustion. Sometimes he sang and shouted.

Oftentimes he fell. Each time the man fell, the dog stopped and waited. Sometimes the man came to his feet of his own accord. When he did not arise after a minute or so, the dog would seize the man and shake him until he again got into motion.

Assured, finally, that something was wrong, a rescue party started out from Camp Two.

Ken Atwood was a crazy man right enough. He was little more than a human skeleton. Raging with fever, temporarily stone blind, he held a half sheet of note paper crumpled in his right fist, which fist the combined effort of two strong men failed to unlock.

It was not until an opiate had been administered by the lumber company's physician, that the contents of that frozen bit of paper were disclosed. It so happened that the Old Man, himself—John Morse, President of the Great Northern Lumber Company—sat at Ken Atwood's side when that crumpled ball of paper was disclosed. When he read it, the Old Man, who had never been known to show the slightest hint of emotion, wept silently.

When Atwood recovered consciousness for a few moments, his first question, after inquiring as to the safety of that precious paper, was in regard to Black Jack Brice.

"Oh, he'll pull through," the doctor assured the sick man, "he'll be minus most of his toes and some fingers; he'll never be able to work as a timber cruiser again. But he'll live."

Ken Atwood nodded. "And how are the eyes, Doc? Will I be able to see again—?"

"Oh, sure. Just keep quiet for a few days more in bed and you'll be all hunkydory."

Ken Atwood's lean face twisted into a smile then; still smiling, he lay back on the white bed and went to sleep. And, as he slept, Mox, the Black Killer, lay close, so close that his black muzzle gently brushed his master's outstretched hand.

OLD-TIMERS

by BERTON BRALEY

They were Scotch and they were Irish, they were Yank and they were wop,
They were Welsh and they were Finn and Cousin Jack;
They were six feet two or longer from the bottom to the top,
They were three feet wide, or more, across the back.
That's the sort the mines were filled with in the days of auld lang syne,
When the camp was rather rawer than today,
When a miner was a miner in a mine that was a mine,
And a man was free and reckless with his pay.

Now they herd a lot of hunkies into barracks and to work—
Just a bunch of cattle driven to the job;
And a name like Kelly, Morgan, Davis, MacIntyre or Burke
Is a name you'll seldom find among the mob.

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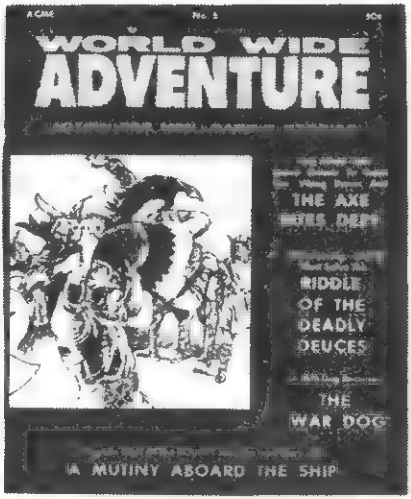
All those arrogant old-timers with the bold and steady eyes
Who would argue with the boss as man to man,
All those free and independent, devil-take-you sort of guys—
Try to find 'em in the workings if you can!

Things are better now, they tell me; life is safer underground,
And the "labor's more dependable," I hear,
But *I* loved the kind *I* worked with—they were great to have around,
For they didn't even know the name of Fear.
They would drink with you or fight you, they would risk their lives for yours,
They were roisterers and ruffians now and then;
But as friends and fellow workers still their memory endures,
For they were not merely miners—they were *Men!*

WHILE THEY LAST!



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THE STOCKADE

(Continued from Page 6)

stroke for entire independence. There was talk of the British at the north helping them to seize Spain's possessions beyond the river by force of arms and drive Spain from the continent . . ."

The men of the West could not take all the credit, but the ruckus they made certainly had a lot to do with spurring things on, so that, as Wilson notes: "The whole country was witness, the while, to the need for real government, instead of a mere advisory Congress, to bind the inchoate nation together in a more stable union."

It was all a very unsettled time, and may sound vaguely familiar, as we read the daily papers with their record of the current breakdown of government and the helplessness of authorities to preserve the rights of honest citizens in their homes, apartments, or peaceful pursuits of business or entertainment on the streets. There was open revolt, and while Shay's rebellion did not really come to much, compared to present day riots and fraudulently "peaceful" demonstrations: "Everyone of the little commonwealths felt the threat of unmanageable disorder and of the upsetting of government itself which that implied. 'You talk, my good Sir,' wrote Washington to Harry Lee in Congress, 'of employing influence to appease the present tumults in Massachusetts. I know not where that influence is to be found, or, if attainable, that it would be a proper remedy for the disorders. *Influence* is not *government.* Let us have one by which our lives, liberties, and properties will be secured, or let us know the worst.' "

For while the story of the West includes tales of anarchy and the rule of bad men and criminals in the towns at times; while some of the early courts were presided over by Judge Colt or Judge Rope, and the rights of the accused were not particularly recognized

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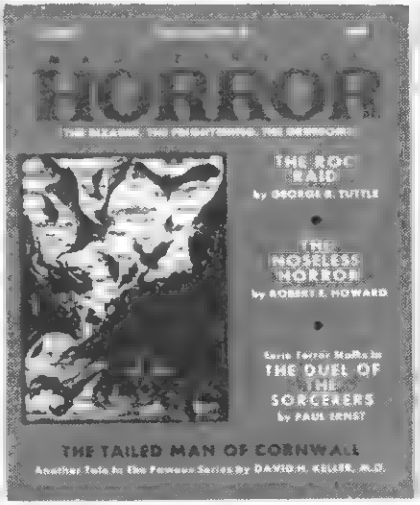

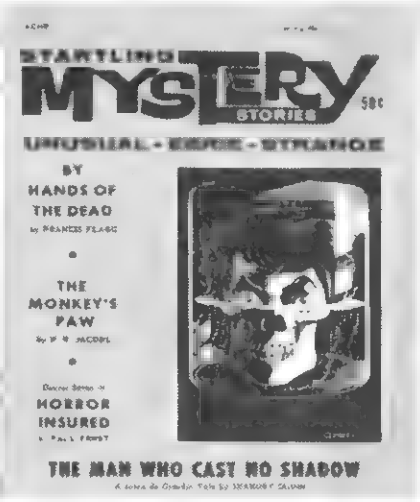

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at times, this was a passing phase in the building up of an orderly society—not part of burning it down. It remains to be seen whether the spirit of the early Westerners and their descendants, who pushed farther West until the sea was their boundary, has gone forever from our land, or whether it can be revived before our contemporary barbarians are permitted to sack the remains of a great nation. RAWL

Comments From Readers

D. Haueter, who liked *Light the War Fires* and *The Lost Lode of the Navaho* best among the stories in our third issue (and who had high praise for our comments about the Mormons in *The Stockade)* adds: "Louis L'Amour (in my estimation) ranks as the most outstanding writer of Western fiction—bar none.

"All the stories were real good, and erased a dull evening I had to look forward to. Sure hope this all-fiction magazine catches in the stream of readers, and become the number one all-fiction monthly."

Gene Tallard writes from Richmond: "I enjoyed the story *Gunswift* in your Fall issue, but hope that you will go easy in future issues on stories that glorify the big-name badmen of the Old West. This has been overdone to the point of nausea. One would think that Jesse James (or, on the other side of the law officer's badge, Bat Masterson) were men for the ages.

"Which, of course, they were not. The unlearned confuse notoriety with fame and that applies to the general public as well as some of the notorious. The bad man, as a rule, was ignorant, dirty (not referring to the fact that he might not have had the opportunity to wash so often, but that he didn't much care), and a parasite upon people who did not share

Did You Miss Any Of These Winners?

1 – THE GIRL IN THE GOLDEN ATOM
by Ray Cummings

2 – THE MOON MENACE
by Edmond Hamilton

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by Laurence Manning

4 – THE CITY OF SPIDERS
by H. Warner Munn

5 – THE PYGMY PLANET
by Jack Williamson

6 – THE INVULNERABLE SCOURGE
by John Scott Campbell

7 – THE FIRES DIE DOWN
by Robert Silverberg

8 – DARK MOON
by Charles Willard Diffin

9 – THE FORGOTTEN PLANET
by Sewell Peaselee Wright

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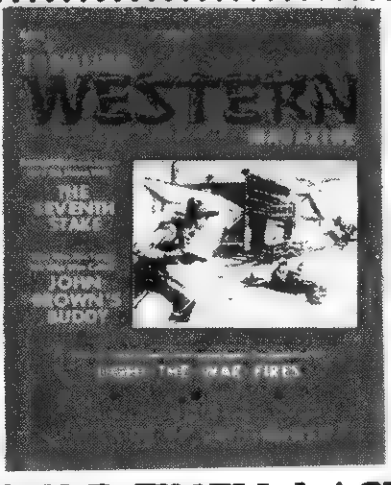

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his contempt for honest work. Some of the so-called heroes who wore law badges were little above their prey. Both have been overadulated.

"Just to show that I don't despise the person with little opportunity to wash, or to get a formal education, let me say that my sympathy was entirely with Jacobe Garcia and Resident Mathews in *The Lost Lode of the Navaho* and *The Seventh Stake*, respectively.

"I missed the animal story this time, and hope you have not stopped looking for them. *The Lost Herd* and *The Call of the Running Moon* were highlights of your first two issues."

No, we certainly haven't ceased our search for good animal stories, and have located a few more which we trust you will enjoy—as well as tales, like *The Mines of Rawhide Jones* and *The Black Killer*, wherein some animal is a featured player, if not the star.

A few stories in our second issue drew dislike votes, although none of these received more than two "X" designations, but what surprised us, pleasantly, was the agreement of all of you active readers (those of you who take the trouble to send in a preference coupon, or a letter or postcard wherein you rate the stories) on the number one tale. It was unanimous. After that, disagreements were notable. So here is how the second issue came out, by your consensus:

(1) *The Call of the Running Moon*, T. Von Zierkursch; (2) *Alberta Clings*, Carl Clausen; (3) tied between *An Ingenue of the Sierras*, Bret Harte and *Empty Shells*, Walt Coburn; (4) *Silent King*, Albert William Stone; (5) *The Breaking of Yukon Camp*, Douglas Mussinon; (6) *Outlaw Blood*, L. R. Sherman; (7) *Roping 'Em*, Paul Bailey.

Now let's hear from you about this issue you're reading. RAWL

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by W. C. Tuttle

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Comment — Suggested stories, authors, etc.

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Please rate the stories in the order of your preference, as many as possible. Ties are always acceptable. If you thought a story was bad (rather than just last place), put an "X" beside it. If you thought a story was truly outstanding, above just first place mark an "O" beside it. (Then the next-best would be "1".)

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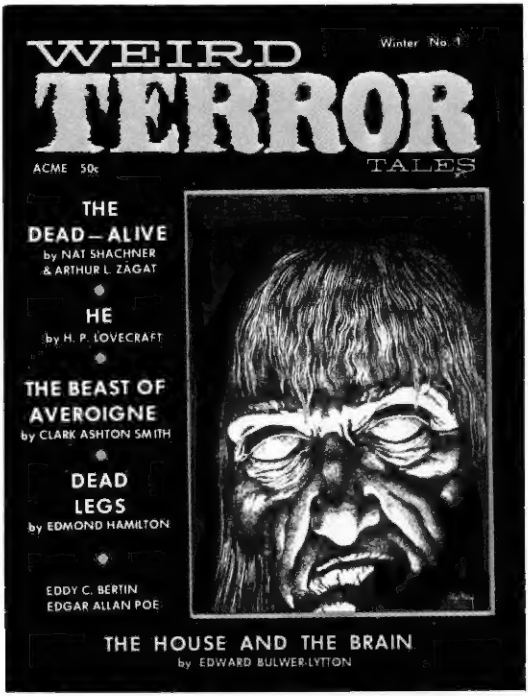

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